FORESTS, BLOOD AND SURVIVAL

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
KOMURAM BHEEM

Bhoopal

Translated from Telugu by P A Kumar

Illustrations by Aelay Laxman

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Hyderabad Book Trust
Plot No. 85, Balajinagar, Gudimalkapur, Hyderabad - 500 034
Phone: 040-23521849, 93815 59238
E-mail: southsidebooks.hbt@gmail.com
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This is a story that begins in the earlier days of the Deccan. In the sixteenth century, Ali Ahmed Shah ruled over the Kingdom of Bijapur. He came to power after the death of his father and ruled for twenty-two years. In his twenty-third year, one of his enemies conspired to kill him. At the time of his death, he had a nine-year-old son, Ibrahim Adil Shah.

In those days, only the son of a king could ascend the throne. Yet, it was impossible for a small boy of nine to rule a kingdom on his own. Providentially, the finance minister in Ali Ahmed Shah's court, a Marathi brahmin, took on the onerous responsibility of ruling the country.

Ibrahim Adil Shah was tremendously happy with his minister's services and gifted him a large tract of land. As this was an extravagant gift, the minister chose to name this district after his king, Adil Shah. In time, historians say that Adil Shahbad came to be known as Adilabad.

On the map, one can locate Adilabad just below the state of Maharashtra. It is a vast district with an area of 16,126 sq.km. More rivers flow in this district than in any other district of the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh. The running waters of these rivers form the boundaries of this district.

Defining the southern border of Adilabad is the river Godavari, while the river Pranahita draws the eastern line. Carving the northwest bounds are the Penganga and the Wardha. Within these boundaries set by the rivers, forests dominate 40 percent of the total area.

It is for this reason that the natural beauty of this region is not to be underestimated. There are several rivulets and streams in the forests as well. Alongside them are hills that appear to scale the reaches of the sky itself. Tumbling down these hills are waterfalls such as Kuntala, Swarna, Satnala, Pocchara, Gayatri and many others. The forests and water bodies provide fantastic nesting grounds for a vast variety of birds.

Among these hills and waterfalls are caves containing ruins and mementos of the ancient gond kingdom—a tribal community that exists to this day and is the centre of our story.

Deep in the forests of Adilabad, much like the animals who seek to hide from their predators, live the tribal communities of the gonds and the kolams—these communities prefer to maintain their distance from the larger cities and urban civilization because the forest, its harvest, and their community lives, stand in greater value to them than the attractions of a fast-paced life.

In one such forest, there was a gond gudem (a gond hamlet) called Sankenapelli. It was a cold winter night, and the moon shone brightly. Yet, no matter how brightly it shone, the chill of the night remained the same, making the poorly clad gonds shiver. They lit bonfires in front of their huts to warm themselves. Some slept in this warmth, while others stretched out their hands towards the fire taking in the heat

Four children sat before the bonfire in the middle of the gudem. They awaited the return of their grandfather, Motiram Gond. They wondered why he had not returned despite the late hour of night.

From somewhere in the distance, a bird cried out and almost in response an owl hooted. Sparkling dust rose high from the fire, twinkling, as the logs burned and crackled. As the bird's screeches echoed through the trees, they heard the sound of their grandfather's staff. The children turned their gaze in the direction of that sound. Lo! Their grandfather had returned! They were happy to make room for him in front of the fire. The skin of his dry belly hung loose, while his eyes were sunken deep with an unnamed sorrow. He looked at the four happy, attentive children, and said to himself, "These children adore me so much; how fond they are of my stories!"

Leaning onto his staff, he slowly folded his legs to sit with the children, his face creasing into a broad toothless smile.

"Grandfather, how are we the kings of this forest? You promised to tell us how this forest belongs to us. Please, tell us now!" cried a sharp looking boy who was seated a little away from the fire, and seemed more interested in the stories of their past than in the biting wintry chill surrounding them.

Grandfather Motiram nodded his head and looked around at them. They were scantily clothed, their lips were blistered, their faces sunken. None

appeared to have eaten even half of their fill. Their grandfather sighed and began to tell the story.

"We are kings, Bheem. We really are the kings of these forests. They belong to us alone. Before the money lenders, the nawabs of the towns and the non-forest villagers entered our gudems, we were the kings. The royal lives of our ancestors are now covered with cobwebs and dust.

"Deep in the past—that is, many grandpa's grandpas and hundreds of grandpas before—there was our amazing grandfather, Bheem. He was the second member of the Pancha Pandavas, and a man of great strength. When

Bheem was a toddler, his mother took him with her to the stream to wash clothes. Bheem slipped from her lap and fell on a rock. The rock cracked instantly, but Bheem was unharmed. He was so strong that he merely smiled after the fall.

When Bheem grew older, he married Hidimbi of the forest. Hidimbi was as strong as Bheem. She played games with big boulders, while Bheem could uproot trees with his bare hands. As though seeking to compete with him, his wife also uprooted trees, broke them into pieces, using the pieces to sweep the boulders and level the ground. They cut down big trees in the forest, plucked bushes, threw away unwanted rocks and cultivated the lands. On moonlit nights such as tonight, they sang songs, calling out rerela rela rela!

Still awake, Komuram Bheem brooded over all that his grandfather had said. He recalled the song taught to him by his vadina (elder brother's wife). "Kuse kuku…kuku…keda mavayi kuku", he began to sing, easily remembering the words. By his side, Jangu fell asleep, but Bheem remained awake.

The chill of the night grew more severe.

Komuram Bheem belonged to the tribe of the gonds. According to the naming system of his tribe, his family name is Komuram, followed by his first name, Bheem.

There are many tribes living in the forest of Adilabad—gond, kolam, pardhan, koya, andh, chenchu, and bhil. The people of the forests are hardworking. Farming is their main occupation. They live on big hills, rather than in the valleys and plains. On top of these hills, the land is spread wide and flat. They refer to this region as 'pataru'—their habitat. The tribes fell trees and bushes on the pataru, gathering the shrubs and grasses into a heap, and set it aside to burn. After burning the heaps, they plough the land. This method of cultivation is called podu farming.

Where the hills are steep and ploughs and oxen cannot be used, they make holes with iron rods and place seeds in the holes. When it rains these seeds sprout. This method is called kuki farming.

In the forests of Adilabad, crops are grown using both these methods. The main crops are jowar, red gram, gingelly, green gram and ragi. Sometimes, the heat creates a ravaging drought, resulting in no food coming from the land. There are also times when the harvest that comes cannot be saved. Then, the

tribes cook and eat gunugu (celosia) and bamboo seeds. However, during famines, even these become scarce, and people keep themselves alive by eating leaves and different kinds of roots and tubers. In winter, the tribes gather vippa (mahua) flowers that fall from the trees. They make flour from it for rotis and brew an alcoholic drink from the flowers. Sometimes they satisfy their hunger simply by eating the flowers directly.

Rela rerela! rela! The chill of winter did not bite them, the rain did not soak them, and the light of the sun did not scorch them. Nothing bothered them. They lived happily together—playing and singing, and harvesting their crops.

The children's grandfather, continuing to narrate the story, also mimed the actions with his hands and facial expressions.

"Bheem and Hidimbi's first born was a son, Ghatodgaja, who was as strong as his father. Following him was another son who was equally as strong, but I do not remember his name. Both the sons worked hard along with their father. After some years, Bheem went away from the forest on work, and to join the other Pandavas. Remaining behind, Ghatodgaja and his brother fought several battles with other kings in the forest. Eventually, they took the whole forest into their possession, and established a great kingdom of their own. They provided sufficient lands to all the tribes of the forest, ensuring that the cultivation of land gave them enough grain for food. Gonds are the progeny of Ghatodgaja and the kolams are the progeny of his younger brother. From that time onwards, we have been the kings of the forests."

Before their grandfather finished the narration of the story, two of the children had slipped into sleep. Only Komuram Bheem and his cousin sat by his side still listening.

"Grandpa! We were once so great! But why do we not have enough to eat now?" asked Komuram Bheem.

"You are right—we don't have enough food to eat. Are we able to save what we produce? Is it enough if we just plough the lands? We have to save the crops from the insects, birds, cattle and wild animals of the forest. More importantly, we must be able to protect the crops from the marauding money lenders and forest officers! Only then will our mouths be full." Saying so, grandfather started yawning. Then he bent over on the ground and fell into a deep slumber.

Komuram Bheem was hungry. He had already digested the jowar gruel that he had eaten in the evening. He now stood up and went into the hut. His vadina and his elder brother were asleep in one corner of the hut, while his father lay at the threshold, coughing. He had been suffering from a gangrenous wound on his leg for many years. Now, he was groaning in his sleep, unable to bear the pain. Their people considered such wounds and pain a normal part of life.

Bheem's father eyed him, asking, "Hey Bheem, did you not sleep?"

Replying with a simple "No", Bheem stepped in and opened the lid of a pot to look for more of the jowar gruel. Sadly, the pot was empty. He looked into the

adjacent broken pot and found a few dried pieces of pork in it. He took four pieces, fried them in the fire and ate them. Then, he slept.

The moon slipped into the west, even then its light still shone bright. Soon the cocks crowed. Bheem's vadina, Kukubayi, woke him up. She held two baskets made of fine bamboo.

Both proceeded to the forest to collect vippa flowers. Bheem held a makeshift wooden torch which lit their way and frightened away the wild animals of the forest. During the season when the vippa flowers fall, the wild bears also

come out of their caves early in the morning to feed on them. The people were afraid of the bears, and so had to be painstakingly careful. They had to be ready to fight with them for the vippa flowers!

"Bheem, be careful, beware of the white snakes," cautioned Kukubayi.

"How can they harm me?" asked the fearless Bheem. Moving into the forest, they started gathering the vippa flowers.

"Have you ever fought with a bear, vadina?" Bheem questioned innocently.

Kukubayi smiled at him. "Can I fight with a bear? I can only know when one comes upon me. But I have seen one such fight."

"When?"

"In my childhood. There was a young man called Jangudada near my mother's house. Like the others in our village, one morning, he went to the forest for vippa flowers. He went there before anybody else. There was a great vippa tree by a pond, where he was gathering the fallen flowers. It was a new moon day, and so he did not notice the black bear in the dark. By the time he saw it, it had already scratched his back with its claws. Though he was frightened, Jangudada had no choice but to fight with the bear. He thrashed the bear with the stick in his hand. The angry bear tried to sink its claws into his chest to kill him. Observing its ferocity, Jangudada realised that he did not stand a chance and took to his heels."

Bheem started to laugh out loud.

"Don't laugh, hear me further! He ran and climbed a nearby tree. The bear did not leave him. Instead it made for the tree, also attempting to climb up after him. Seeing this, Jangudada crawled onto a branch and jumped down. He caught hold of the stretched forelegs of the bear which was trying to climb the tree. On one side was the bear, and on the other side was Jangu and in between them was the tree. Now you see Bheem... Jangudada beat it into the tree with all his strength... he wanted to kill it. But the bear was also strong, and it was not ready to die. It roared loudly. Blood began to flow out of its mouth. By that time, many people from the gudem arrived on the scene. With lighted torches in their hands, they witnessed the strange spectacle of man versus beast. Some chose to join the fight and beat the bear with sticks."

Bheem could not bear the suspense. "Did they kill it?" he asked.

"No. Jangudada let the exhausted bear go. It was roaring and gnashing its teeth at everyone, trying to scare them. It ran away into darkness. It was never seen again in those parts."

Bheem heard the story, wide-eyed with astonishment. He and his vadina gathered the flowers fallen under a vippa tree. The chirping of birds filled the air, and a cold wind blew over them.

"Vadina! If a bear comes now, can my elder brother fight it?" Bheem asked suddenly.

"Oh! Why not? You too can fight. If there is no fear, can't the young also stand up for themselves?" said Kukubayi

Bheem felt emboldened by her words.

Bheem was fond of Kukubayi, his vadina. He liked the stories she told him and the songs she sang. Whether or not she ate, she would always offer Bheem food. Whenever she went to the forest, she took him along with her. Bheem sought her advice in all that he did. He believed she knew as many stories as his grandfather Motiram.

By the time they returned to their gudem from the forest, the sun had risen. They spread the flowers in front of their hut on bamboo mats to dry.

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A mangal bird was swinging on the branches of a frangipani tree. The wind tried to push the bird off the branch, yet the bird flew and hid behind leaves elsewhere on the same branch. Komuram Bheem looked intently at the bird. He had come to the forest with his friends Jangu, Konthal, Madu, and Pyku. Madu had not been in the gudem for the last ten days or so. He had only returned that morning from the neighbouring village. The grey goat belonging to Bheem's flock had given birth to two ewes. Madu had seen it, picked up the ewes and approached Bheem, asking, "When did the goat deliver these ewes, Bheem?"

"A week ago. That evening, something strange happened, did you know that—"

That day, all but one of the goats returned to the gudem. A tired grey goat remained in the forest. Though it grew darker as night approached, Bheem remained with the goat. It was when he was alone with the goat, that a wolf

appeared. It howled loudly, calling out to its family. Unafraid, Bheem drove it away.

Jangu and Kondal had heard the story earlier. But they listened once more. In the meantime, Pyku had climbed up the nearby neem tree. He sat on a branch above and dropped leafy twigs to feed the goats below.

"Hurry down Pyku, the demons are coming. Danger awaits you. If they see you—"Jangu called in warning.

But Jangu's words did not reach Pyku in time, as he was busy singing and cutting the twigs. The sound of footsteps nearby put a stop to Bheem's story. Clearly, someone was coming towards them. Even as they readied themselves for the visitors, Bheem noticed Pyku jumping down from the tree, in spite of the great height.

In what seemed like no time at all, three forest watchmen and a tax collector arrived on the scene. They caught hold of Pyku who, after jumping down from the tree, was trying to flee. They began to beat him with sticks. Bheem and his other friends were scared. Pyku started weeping. The men were followed by two sergeants, a forest inspector and another watchman.

"Cutting the trees, you bastards! Is this forest planted and raised by your grandfather?" cried the inspector. He ordered the others to take them prisoners. "Hey! Catch all of them and bring them to the bungalow!"

A bungalow did not mean a house in this case. It was a hut meant to accommodate the visiting forest inspector, watchman, sergeants, money lenders and the police. It was also the equivalent of what we call a dispute settlement centre, or a racchabanda, in the villages.

The forest inspector loomed over the children like a terrible giant—tall, strong, red-eyed, potbellied, with a bushy moustache. The watchman was not as tall, but he, too, had a big belly. Even though he had travelled in a cart, he was breathing hard and was visibly tired.

Having instructed their assistants to bring Bheem, his friends, and the goats, the inspector and the watchman turned back and started moving towards the gudem, with the tax collector following closely behind. The three men went to Bheem and his friends who were shivering with fear under the tree.

Jangu backed away from the approaching sergeants and ran to the side. Sensing that Jangu might escape, one sergeant chased him. Jangu ran with the sergeant in quick pursuit. He chased him past the trees and over the fields. Jangu ran towards a large jagged rock plateau. He had a reason for this—harvested red gram had been spread to dry on the rock. Aware of this, Jangu ran by the side of the rock, avoiding the gram. The angry sergeant, on the other hand, ran straight over the rock, stepping on the red gram. Just as Jangu had

planned, the sergeant slipped and tumbled down with a thud onto the rock. He injured his mouth and his legs and hands. He stood up, bawling in pain, and limped towards the gudem.

Back at the tree, along with Pyku, the sergeants caught hold of Madu, Kondal and Bheem. The gang of forest officials dragged the gond children and began the walk back to their camp. As they walked, the sergeants asked, "Whose son is he—the fellow who ran away? What is his name?"

Bheem thought over it for a moment and replied, "We don't know who he is."

"You rogue, why was he there with you, if you didn't know him?" berated the angry sergeant, hitting Bheem on the head.

"We don't know him. It seems his cow went missing in the forest. He came to search for it. We don't know his gudem."

The other men saw the weeping sergeant who had chased Jangu as he limped back. On seeing his wounds, they asked him as to how it had transpired. He said, "That fellow... the one I chased... the gond son of a bitch pushed me onto a rock and ran away."

The sergeants got enraged.

"Out with it, you rascals! Who is he? He dares to beat us and escape? He must be from your gudem. Come on, give us his name!" demanded one of the sergeants, beating Kondal. Unable to control himself, Kondal started to cry.

Bheem said, unhesitatingly, "He said his name was Arju."

As the weeping sergeant and his companions entered the village, they saw the inspector and the watchman seated on a cot in front of the bungalow. Their cart was halted some distance away. The taxman stood near the cartman. Some of the gonds and kolams also stood in the vicinity. After looking at everyone present, the inspector asked the wounded sergeant what had happened to him. He repeated the story that he had narrated earlier. They tied up Bheem, Kondal and Madu along with Pyku. They also gathered all the goats.

The inspector twisted his moustache with anger. He shouted, "Hey fellows, the father of the boy Arju in this gudem should come here first."

Arju's father came there and stood with folded hands. He did not know why he had been summoned.

"Hey fellow, where is your son?"

"Sir, he must be playing somewhere nearby."

"Ah! Call him here!"

Someone fetched the child. He was a two-year-old boy. He was unclothed and looked sickly with a bloated tummy; his limbs looked frail. There were

wounds on his legs with flies sitting on them. He had a runny nose, and spittle oozed from his mouth.

Seeing him, the inspector exclaimed, "Yak!...what a brat!"

Just then, the chief of the gudem, Komuram Chinnu, arrived to greet the men, saying "Ram, Ram, inspector. This is the only Arju we have in our gudem."

Komuram Chinnu was Bheem's father. The gangrenous wound on his leg dripped and caused him pain.

"Then that brat is not of this gudem. We will deal with him later... Hey! Chinnu! These brats are felling trees in the forests. I have told them hundreds of times not to pluck even a leaf in the forest. I sent the watchman and sardar to caution you. Today, I myself have come. What do I see? I see trees being felled with my own eyes. Do you know the punishment for felling trees?" The inspector shouted angrily at them.

By then, all the people of the gudem had gathered there, and stood watching fearfully. Pyku was sobbing.

"Sir! These foolish and ignorant children are no doubt at fault. Why should we fell all the trees in the forest? Our boys might have cut a branch or two to feed the goats! Please pardon us," Chinnu entreated.

The watchman, who had been silent until then, ordered the sergeants, "Men! Cut off his fingers so that he will not cut the branches again."

The inspector laughed, while Pyku's weeping father and mother fell at the inspector's feet. Komuram Chinnu pleaded, "Please pardon him sirs, for this is his first misdeed. If the boy loses his ability to work, what will he eat? Please pardon him this once. He is only a little fellow, you can thrash him if you wish."

There was a chorus of pleas as the other members of the gudem fell at the feet of the forest officials. All the children began crying. Pyku struggled to free himself while the sergeants held him fast. The inspector casually ordered, "Proceed".

The sergeants held Pyku's right hand down on a teak log on the ground. Even though he squirmed, crying loudly, and tried to push them away, they cut off his fingers. The whole forest shivered with the echoes of Pyku's screams.

Mercifully, Pyku fell unconscious.

Bheem, Madu, and Kondal got a good thrashing, and were then released.

The watchman read out the names of various people from a list, specifying the amount that each had to pay to the government. He demanded that the arrears be paid immediately. The inspector threatened them with severe punishment if they failed to pay the taxes. They would be beaten to death; they would be driven away and their gudems burnt down.

Some of the gonds brought grain and gave it to the authorities. The forest officials raided the huts of non-payers and conducted a search. They broke the pots, collected whatever grain they could find and carried it away to the cart. They tied four goats to the back of the cart and caught hold of a dozen of the chickens. The officials loaded the cart with the goods and prepared to leave. The middle of the cart was cushioned with soft grass. The inspector sat there, while the watchman sat at the back of the cart. The tax collector walked in the front, while the sergeants followed the cart.

The entire gudem looked as if it had been plundered. Much like its people, it, too, groaned with pain. Bheem sat near Pyku and wept. All the people stared angrily at the departing forest officials.

Why did the officials hate them so much? How were they at fault? Who owned the forest? What was the relationship of the government with the forest? How could it belong to the government alone? Why cut Pyku's fingers for cutting down the twigs and branches? Bheem's mind was crowded with a flurry of questions.

These forest officials demanded taxes, but why should one pay taxes at all? And who decided how much to pay? They demanded a goat-tax, cow-tax, an ox-tax, a plot-tax, and a field platform-tax! And after demanding those taxes, why impose taxes for grass, for land, and even for the hut? If they paid the taxes, then what would they eat? If the officials could take away all the produce in the name of taxes, wouldn't they, the people of the gudem, die of hunger?

Bheem lay still like a log, thinking endlessly about what he and his friends had been through.

Bheem's thoughts were interrupted by some shouts and cries. They came from no farther than the edge of the gudem—from the direction of the departing cart. All the people in the gudem looked in that direction. The cart was no longer visible to them. Two or three young people went after it to see what was wrong, but Chinnu ordered them not to go. "The oxen must have got scared. It is difficult to pull the cart in the rocky ruts of the hills," said Grandpa Motiram.

The dogs barked. There was pain in the song of the kuki bird. The kids bleated piteously on seeing their mothers being driven away. Bheem remained seated listlessly until it became dark.

When Kukubayi came to him and said, "Bheem… let us go to fetch water," only then did Bheem get up.

Grinding his teeth together, Bheem said, "Vadina, I will chop off the heads of that watchman and that inspector."

"Bheem, the day when we, too, can chop off their limbs will surely come. The elders of our gudem do not understand. Don't worry. When you grow up, you can deal with them... ," his vadina consoled him.

"Vadina, this water is ours; this air is ours; the sunlight is ours; the sky is ours; the rains are ours. Then why is the forest not ours? How did this forest and the land become theirs?"

"Bheem, if only all our gonds asked themselves these questions, things might be better. Ask your father, maybe you will get the answers..."

Vadina lifted the pot to her head. Waiting by her side, Bheem looked beyond the stream, and saw a surprisingly familiar figure approaching.

"Arey! Jangu."

Jangu came towards them, running and laughing. Bheem was happy to see that he was safe.

"How is Pyku?" Jangu asked.

"Pyku won't die. But he won't be able to do any work with his right hand," said Kukubayi.

"Those rogues... that inspector and that watchman, I taught them a lesson. Do you know who toppled their cart? I did it! They are grievously injured."

"What! How did you do it?" asked Bheem with great delight. "That sergeant fell on a rock you know. At that time, I was in the forest. I heard Pyku's cries. Then all of you started crying. I got scared and went deeper into the forest. Thinking that they must have hurt Pyku... I started walking slowly from the bushes. I hid close to the path of the forest officials' cart as it returned, behind a rock. And I watched as the cart crossed the stream and moved down the hill. You see, at the turning of the nemili and nakerta trees, the road is not good! There, I took aim and threw a stone on the face of the ox on the left, and it struck him with a 'thud'. The ox got scared, pulled the cart into a pit, and the cart toppled. The inspector and the watchman were injured. The oxen did not seem to have been hurt, thankfully. As they were distracted, I slowly moved to the bend behind the trees, unseen, and hid behind the rocks again. I escaped from there as soon as I got the chance to do so. The sergeants did search for the thrower of the stone—I saw them, but they did not see me. At last, they went away."

"Hurray! What a fine thing! You definitely taught them a lesson," said Bheem, bubbling with glee.

"Jangu, did they not see you, truly?" asked Kukubayi. "Truly, vadina, they did not see me."

"We are saved. Start walking, it is getting dark," saying so, she moved on, smiling.

Bheem and Jangu followed her instructions and walked closely behind her.

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Bheem's mother always worked on the farm. She had no other vocation. Although his father was the chief of the gudem, he also did other work related to the farm. Somu and Bojju were Bheem's elder brothers. Somu, the eldest, cultivated the land with the plough. Bojju and Bheem helped by grazing the cows and goats. They kept a watch on the crop in the fields, attended to household work, as well as the regular tasks, which changed with each season.

Bheem's father, Komuram Chinnu, had two younger brothers. One was Komuram Kurdu and the other was Komuram Yasvanth.

Yasvanth was also called 'Yesu' by all. Along with his elder brother Chinnu, he farmed and stayed in the same gudem.

Komuram Kurdu had five sons. Two of them, Suddu and Jangu, were older than Bheem. Raghu and Somu were nearly of the same age as Bheem. Only Badu was younger. Similarly, Komuram Yesu had three sons—Lacchu, Ramu and Raju. Ramu and Raju regularly played with Bheem.

One fine morning, after eating his breakfast of jowar gruel, Bheem stood outside his hut. His uncle's son, the seven-year-old Raju, came to Bheem. He had a length of jute fibre in his hand, and was naked.

"What do you want?" Bheem asked him.

Raju gave him the fibre, saying, "Annayya, will you please make me a sling?"

"Come on. Let us sit on the machaan in the field, I will knit a sling for you," Bheem responded. They set off for the machaan in the jowar field.

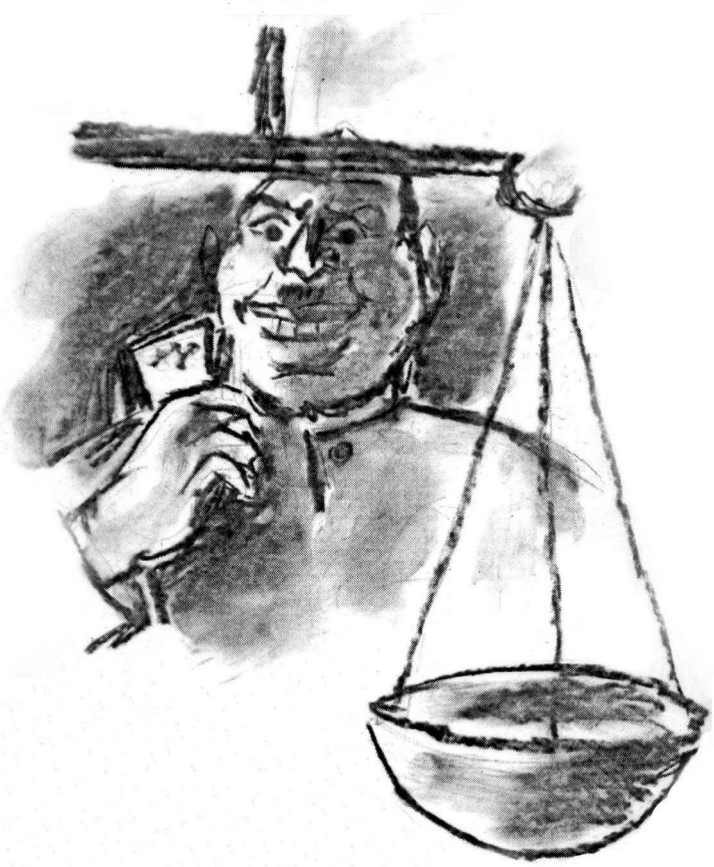
Sitting on the machaan, Bheem knit a nice sling. He showed Raju how to place a stone in the sling. Bheem swung the sling to show him how to hit a target. In the distance, he saw some people in white clothes coming towards the gudem. There was also a cart behind them. He could also see Somu pulling out the grown gunugu weeds from the jowar field.

Bheem called out to his brother, Somu, "Annayya, look, some people are coming."

Somu looked and replied, "Who else? Those are the money lenders."

"Where are the grains to measure and give to the money lenders?" sighed Bheem's mother. She looked at the approaching party, even though her sight had dimmed. Through the haze, she spotted a cart. She remembered that, in her childhood, the money lenders used to come to their gudem on foot, and that they carried baskets on their heads. She again bent down to the field, looking for budama berries among the creepers, but she did not harvest the berries; she was overcome by the nostalgia of her childhood days.

When Bheem's mother was a child, the gonds and kolams believed the deceptive sweet-talk of the money lenders. As they did not know the market prices, they willingly gave them all articles at a cheap price. Even now, they were



forced to part with their harvests for next to nothing. The Adivasis did not know how to count. They had no education and were fooled by the foxy tricks of the money lenders. The money lenders kept some jaggery pieces, salt, peppermint, cigarettes and biscuits in their baskets and carried them to the gudems. They gave a handful of salt to the Adivasis and, in exchange, took a potful, roughly 22 kgs, of red gram. They placed a piece of jaggery in the hands of the children, and took a jarful, about twenty-four-and-a-half kgs, of gingelly oil seeds. In exchange for a cigarette or a leaf of tobacco, they took half a pot of honey. In the earlier days, the people of the hills did not know the prices of the articles the money lenders traded. They did not know the prices of their own articles either. The money lenders, who exploited them, gradually brought clothes, footwear, combs, and talcum powder to the hills. They taught them how to buy articles against money. With time, they started lending them money for any needs or emergencies. At harvest time, they extracted repayment along with interest. The people of the gudems never understood the calculations.

Even now, they did not understand these calculations. The money lenders snatched not only jowar, red gram, gingelly seeds, honey or vippa flowers, but also all the riches of the forest. By lending money against the gonds' and kolams' mortgages of their lands, these loan sharks constructed houses and bungalows in the town of Jangaon (present day Asifabad).

Komuram Bheem's mother knew all this. Bheem, however, did not. Only if somebody told him, would he come to be aware of how they were being exploited. But he could not grasp why the money lenders took things away from the tribal people.

One day, after covering many gudems, a money lender came to Sankenapelli. There were a few more people with him. He summoned the gudem chieftain, Komuram Chinnu. Every hut in the gudem was deep in debt. A major share from each of their crops went to this Shylock. As soon as he arrived, he smiled and made enquiries after each person in the gudem. He opened his ledgers and placed them in front of the illiterate people. He started by pointing out their dues. He then showed them their thumb impressions. By compounding the interest, the moneylender tried to prove that ten rupees had grown to one hundred rupees. The ignorant people of the gudem unquestioningly accepted what he said. These poor people of the forests, living precariously as they were, thought that it was their duty to repay the debts by measuring out all their grains to him.

If somebody repaid the debt in full, the money lender said that it had been noted in the account book, but he also said that a small sum of five rupees had been left as balance on that gond's name. This, he said, was meant to keep the loan account running, and to avoid the opening of a new account. He said, "Let it go, who will be the new surety?"

After a period of two years, he collected 100 rupees against the old debt of five rupees. This was how the money lenders cheated the gonds.

The money lender who came to the gudem called each one of the gonds by their names and demanded repayment of the loan. Some were saddened to hear that their loan had yet to be cleared. Others said that they had no grain and could not pay now, as the crops were not good. In a time of foodgrain scarcity, they did not know how to repay the debts. Some were depressed and weighed down by these thoughts. 'What shall I tell the man who lent me the money? Will he keep quiet about my debt?'

"Should the gonds, who are supposed to keep their word, speak like this? Weren't your fathers and grandfathers ethical? You are straying away from their morals and forgetting your duties. You are spoiling the good name of your elders. If you die in debt, do you think the gods will pardon you?" The money lender spoke angrily, reminding them of their duty.

He called Komuram Chinnu to the bungalow. He insisted that there should be an on-the-spot settlement of the debts. Chinnu, being the chief of the village, bowed down before him and prayed for mercy because the crops had failed this time. But the money lender did not agree. He gave them a week's deadline. He placed in the cart all the articles that had been collected from the people and departed.

The lands were mortgaged. If the money lender filed cases in the court, they would find it difficult to keep going to Jangaon. If they did not go, the police would come, beat them, and drag them to court. The people were unable to tackle their problems and grew distressed.

After thinking over the matter for a whole week, Chinnu called for Somu, his eledest son. He sent him with a cow and a few goats to a shop in Jangaon. Somu sold them there and settled a part of the debts to the money lender.

It pained Bheem deeply to see the goats and the cow being driven away in the morning to be sold. He could not bear to watch. He left and stood at the bend of the jowar field on a narrow footpath.

Badu, Bheem's uncle's youngest son, was playing there. The bottle gourd jar Badu had been playing with fell near Bheem. As Badu came running to pick it up, from the side of the footpath, a snake crawled in the opposite direction. It had already heard Badu's footsteps and was hissing and spreading its hood—readying itself to strike. If there was a moment's delay, it would bite Badu. Bheem, who was behind it, jumped into action and caught hold of the snake by its tail. He spun it round and round and threw it into the jowar field. Stunned and wide-eyed with fear, Badu ran to hold Bheem's legs for safety; Bheem comforted him. He loved children dearly.

Bheem had been powerless to do anything in the face of the cow and goats being taken away to be sold, but he cherished the fact that he could at least help his cousin.

Time passed, and it was now a festival day. The entire gudem was happy once again. As soon as the sun set, the young and the old began to dance enthusiastically. The group included Komuram Bheem's cousins, Raghu, Somu, Badu, Ramu, Raju and Jangu, and his friends, Kondal, Pyku and Madu. All of them wore costumes. They danced the gussadi dance and everyone joined for the dhimsa and dandari dances. Everybody enjoyed the feast together. They ate the dishes specially prepared for the festival in their huts. In the midst of all this celebration, the children remembered their grandfather, Motiram, and went to his hut.

"Grandpa, will you not tell us a story?" they asked beseechingly.

Grandpa Motiram was fond of children, and he wished to yield to their request even though his wife, Rukkubayi, was ill. She suffered from a chronic disease. And so, he said, "All right, I will tell you a story, but not here, near the sick person. Let us instead go out into the open."

The children shouted and ran out instantly. Grandfather picked up his staff and started moving slowly. It was then that they heard the shouts of Komuram Bojju, who was keeping a watch on the farm.

Shouts at such a late hour meant that wild animals had entered the farm. The children began to make a great noise. Some picked up tins within their reach. Others picked up the drums and started to beat them, running towards the farm. The elders, too, made a noise, running in the same direction. Bheem pulled out the bludgeon from the roof of the hut. He began to howl, rhythmically beating his mouth with his right hand, and rushed out.

A sounder of wild pigs had entered the farm. The pigs stomped over the entire field and were digging up the land. (This occurred quite often.) Bheem led his people. Some threw stones while others used sticks to beat the pigs. The pigs began to retreat. With the drumbeats and the shouting, the people of the gudem successfully scared and drove the pigs away. Komuram Bheem ran after them into the bushes and the trees.

One of the boars—fat and heavy—turned towards Bheem and charged at him. Bheem relentlessly beat it and gored it with his spear. It seemed to retreat in fear, but returned. It came after Bheem once more with great ferocity. Sensing danger, Bheem sprinted and leaped onto a nearby rock. The boar, which had been severely wounded by Bheem's sharp spear, and was blinded with rage, struck the rock like a speeding bullet. Instantly, its skull broke into two. It died, writhing in agony.

Emerging from behind the trees, Bheem called out loudly to the others. He told them that he had killed the pig. The people of the gudem were delighted. The pig was so heavy that three men struggled to carry it. After tying the pig to a yoke, four men carried it to the gudem. Chinnu, the chief, divided the pork equally amongst all the people of the gudem. They celebrated an unexpected and memorable event on that day—the merry-making added to the joy of the festival.

The next day, Bheem's wound on his knee ached. But he did not waste time thinking about it. Instead, he got ready to go to the stream to bring water along with his vadina, but Pyku did not allow him to go. He said that he would go with vadina instead. The wound on Pyku's hand had begun to heal, but he was still badly maimed. Yet he seemed determined to accompany Kukubayi.

Bheem thought to himself, "We are not afraid of poisonous insects. We drive away ferocious animals and can even kill them. But here we are, dying because of the merchant-money lenders and forest officials. How can we change this? What can be done? These people, from beyond the hills, are dangerous to us. And we have no idea how to drive them away. Had a lion attacked my friend Pyku, I could have saved him. I would not have allowed his hand to be bitten off."

Bheem was deeply immersed in his thoughts until Pyku and his vadina returned. As soon as he saw his vadina, he remembered the song that they always sang together. He sang it once more to himself, "Kuse kuku…kuku… keda mavayi kuku…"

Kukubayi came up to Bheem. "Bheem, does your leg still hurt?" she asked. "Don't worry. Get up, wash your face and drink gruel. Nothing will happen to you. Don't stay back at home for such a trivial thing. Come and hear the story of Ramji Gond."

Bheem rose to his feet immediately. He stretched his legs and stood erect. Yes, he felt no pain, and he saw the truth of his vadina's words.

Bheem's vadina began to tell him the story. He wanted to know more about Ramji Gond. She turned him away, and said, "Your grandpa, Motiram, who is older than your father, also knows the story. He has told you many stories, and he will tell this story also. Go and ask him."

Bheem did not go to Grandpa Motiram—not then. His grandfather's wife, Rukkubayi, was on her deathbed. Bheem knew this, though his vadina was still unaware of the fact. He knew it was best to give Grandpa Motiram space.

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Grandpa Motiram's wife died of hunger and disease. Amongst all the diseases, the most fatal disease is hunger. All the gonds knew this. The people in the gudems ate only once a day, that too only gruel, and even that serving was but half their fill. It allowed them to survive, but not much else. They were vulnerable to disease—nobody knew when or how soon death might come for her or him.

After ten days had passed and the darkness of the night had set in, all the children sat and talked near the bethal flag at the edge of the village. They saw Grandpa Motiram coming towards them from the hut. All of them jumped with joy. Bheem immediately made room for their grandfather and requested him to sit—looking up into his face. Grandfather's expression was so solemn that no one dared to request him to tell them a story as he usually did. But the youngest amongst them, Lacchu, innocently pleaded, "Grandpa, won't you tell us a story?"

Grandpa Motiram could not suppress his amusement. He laughed loudly, showing his toothless gums. Then he said, "Ok, I will tell you a story, but first, light a fire. What story should I tell you?"

Bheem said, "Ramji Gond's story."

The children quickly made a fire and they all sat around it. Grandfather looked around at all of them. Bheem moved to sit closer to him.

"This is a story set far in the past. That is, in the time when my father, who would have been your great-grandfather, ruled the land.

"In those days, our chief lived in Utnoor and your grandfathers and my father also lived there. There was no trouble with taxes and no harassment from the merchant-money lenders. The whole forest was ours. One day, some white lords came to the forest. I don't know where they came from and why. They

wanted to hunt in the forest. The white lords and the Nizam were friends. By 'white lords', I mean the English people. The Nizam had made arrangements for their stay. Our people thought, 'Let the white lords hunt and take the deer and rabbits from the forest. We will remain quiet and keep to ourselves, for they are also men like us.' But it did not happen that way. In the forest, they caught hold of our people, just like they caught the animals they had come to hunt. They carried our people away and forced them to do the household chores in their houses. This was not right. Human beings are not animals. When some youngsters appealed to our king, he prohibited the entry of outsiders into the forest. He sent out an order stating that they should not carry away the people. He stated this very strongly to all those entering the forest. At this, the white lords became very angry. 'How dare you question us when the Nizam himself bends low before us and salutes us!' They cut off the hands of those who questioned them. Not only that, they declared that the entire forest belonged to them, and that they owned all the land.

"Our king, Ramji Gond, did not tolerate this. When he heard the entire story, he ground his teeth together ferociously, and his eyes became red with anger. He rose like a warrior to his feet, and immediately, the drums in the forest began to boom—their calls sounding out. All the gudems were alerted, and the chieftains assembled. The mukhasins, who are chieftains to hundreds of villages, were also called in. They all united as one. We had no alternative but to wage war."

The children listened with rapt attention. Gesturing dramatically, Motiram continued the story.

"King Ramji Gond explained to all the chieftains who responded to the call why the war was being waged. The white lords were disturbing the peace of the forest. They were looting the gudems. They were not treating humans as humans must be treated. To remedy this injustice, he consulted the elders, and those who were more experienced. They told him that it was better to send a messenger to the white men. Agreeing to the suggestion, he deputed an elder with the message, 'Sirs, we are people dependent on the forests. The forest is our mother. The forest is our kingdom. We are neither against anybody nor against any kingdom. You are the ones who have come here and are troubling us. You are provoking us. This is not justified. Please convey this message to your enlightened king. Do not trouble us. If you do not heed our request and want war, then it is our pleasure to grant you your wish. The gonds and kolams will teach you a good lesson. The people are ready to shed blood to save their kingdom.' The person who carried this message did not return. Instead, all that was sent back was his head.

"The white men readied themselves for war. They came to confront us. Can our people remain silent? No! They sounded the trumpets, beat the drums. The war began. Our weapons were swords, lances, bows and arrows, spears, slings and stones and the boulders in the hills. Our warriors were intelligent and fought the battle with whatever was available to them. A great war was fought. The fight went on for three days and three nights. We exhausted our weaponry. The enemy fought with guns. They continued to fill their guns and fire on us. Even then, our people were unafraid. They did not lose heart. They killed many white soldiers. On the fourth day of the battle, they arrested our king and took him away. All our gudems were in a disarray. The white men burnt down the gudems. They looted our people. They took Ramji Gond to a place called Nirmal. There they shot him dead and hung his body from a tree.

"Our people became agitated. The young and the old wept. The plants and flowers withered. The birds and animals grieved with us. For three days, nobody touched food." Grandpa Motiram finished the story.

The children sat in silence.

"If we had guns, wouldn't we have defeated them, grandpa?" asked Jangu.

"Oh, certainly, but we didn't have them!" replied their grandfather.

Komuram Bheem's mind was filled with the story of Ramji Gond. In his thoughts, he relived the story and he felt as though Ramji Gond was with them now. Slowly, he picked up the song, "Kuse kuku… kuku… keda mavayi kuku... kuku…"

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The heat of the summer sun hammered down upon them, blistering in its intensity. The leaves of the trees fell. The smaller birds, unable to bear the heat, dropped dead to the earth. As always, hot winds blew through the land. The gonds had to deal with severe water shortage in summer. The gudems in the uplands, in particular, experienced extreme difficulties due to the scarcity of water. Women had to climb up and down the hills for water. They had to walk down two to three kilometres, and then climb back up with heavy pots filled with water balanced on their heads. Can life exist without water?

The water scarcity in itself was dreadful, and yet, in the summer, the tribals had to contend with difficulties in securing food as well.

When crops had to be grown, there was no rain. If the monsoons arrived, and it was insufficient, the crops were damaged. Even when a part of the crop thrived, they suffered losses due to insects, birds, monkeys and pigs. The loan sharks then snatched away whatever remained in the aftermath of the pests. Ultimately, whatever the tribals could save would be carried away by the forest officials. In the end, the unfortunate people were left with only leaves and weeds. In summer, they ate only leaves. If not leaves, they dug up different types of tubers. They ate whatever was available. In this way, the people and animals in the forest suffered through the summer.

During one such summer, Komuram Chinnu was unwilling to continue suffering. He wished for death. He developed a fever and the wound on his leg continued to ail him.

He lay on a cot in their hut, dying. He called his younger brothers, Kurdu and Yesu. He called his sons, Somu, Bojju and Bheem. He also called the sons of his brothers. Their entire family assembled before him.

Handing over the care of his sons to Kurdu, he uttered these last words, "From this moment onwards, consider them your children. After the death of our father, I raised you. Now it is your turn to repay the debt, and to raise them. Don't stay in this gudem— go elsewhere. You can't live here. This land is no more fertile. More importantly, the forest officials and the loan sharks will not allow you all to live in peace. Please go to Surdapur. Cut the forest there and cultivate the land. I was the chieftain of this gudem. After me, Somu will become the chieftain. The chiefs have duties to discharge."

Somu moved closer to his father to hear his words better. Komuram Chinnu continued, "Pray to the gods. Celebrate the festivals well. Whether the chief has grain or not, he has to feed the government officials. In lieu of this, the gudem people will plough your land for free for a day. You must appoint a messenger for sending out messages. When disputes arise, you must give just judgments. If the dispute cannot be settled, you must tell them, 'Go to the mukhasi, who is the head of 100 gudems.'"

Bheem listened to his words silently.

Finally, Chinnu said, "This body has become old. It is torn asunder. I am leaving it behind and going away." Smiling, he closed his eyes for the last time. Four men lifted him up and laid him down on the grass. Somu poured water into Komuram Chinnu's mouth. Thus, he ended his life, at peace with himself.

Komuram Bheem watched in disbelief and quiet amazement. He thought it remarkable that his father could so simply announce his death, and then die.

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After Komuram Chinnu's death, Komuram Kurdu left Sankenapelli. His brother Yesu, his family, his elder brother's children and his own—all left the gudem together. The other people of the gudem remained behind, while some of the kolams also went with Kurdu. They left taking the cattle, goats, chickens, baskets, and their belongings heaped in their carts. Bheem left the gudem in great anguish. He remembered the trees and the forest, the rocks, big and small, the hills, valleys, and streams. This was his home: he knew every facet of it intimately, and now had no choice but to leave it behind. Bheem was overwhelmed with grief.

Observing his anguish, his vadina Kukubayi said that this was the way life was led in the forests. It was harsh, but they must have the strength to bear it and move forward.

They passed through Jangaon, Dhanora and eventually reached Surdapur. They stopped their carts in a valley surrounded by three hillocks and built their huts adjacent to a big stream. The forest surrounding them was vast. Remembering the forest of his youth, Bheem felt happy at the thought of converting this into fertile land.

They felled the trees, cut the bushes, and removed the rocks and stones. Thorny shrubs were burnt down and the land was levelled. If each one of them prepared their own land individually, it would take far too long, and so Komuram Kurdu said, "Let us work collectively. Afterwards, let us partition the lands equally among ourselves."

One day, the children were in the forest, when they were faced with a problem. Komuram Bheem, Somu, Badu, Jangu, Raju, Madu and Lacchu were together, and were returning home after grazing the goats. Because these hills were new to them, the children did not know all of their secrets. Lacchu, who was the youngest of them all, entered a rocky crevice. Being small, he was able to enter the crevice on his own but was unable to return as he had to climb up a steep and narrow tunnel. He began to cry. When they noticed that Lacchu was missing, Bheem and the others started to search for him. Finally, they were able to locate him by the sound of his weeping. But they were unable to lift him up, as it was a very narrow tunnel. None of them knew what to do.

In the near distance, they heard the roar of a tiger. It seemed to suggest that it was hungry. They shook with fear. On which hillock was the tiger? How close was it? None of them could tell the distance between them and the beast. They continued to hear its roars. All the children thought of running away, leaving Lacchu behind. Then Bheem, not knowing what else to do, told them, "First, all of you leave."

"What about you?" asked the rest of the children.

"I will kill it."

They did not know how big or how strong the tiger was, yet Bheem said that he would kill it. Understandably, they doubted his ability to do so, and were scared.

Once again, they heard the roar of the tiger.

"All of you should go and tell our elders about this. I will remain here. If we leave Lacchu behind alone, he will die of fear. If the tiger is small, it may be able to enter the crevice and kill him. Lacchu should not become food for a tiger! Let us make a plan to save him—we will tie a goat to a tree so that the tiger can see it. If the tiger comes here before our people reach this place, it will eat the goat, and Lacchu will survive. If our people arrive first, then both the goat and Lacchu will live. All of our people together will be able to drive away or kill the tiger," said Bheem.

"This is a good plan," said Jangu. "What about you?" asked Somu.

"I will climb up that teak tree and sit there," Bheem replied.

They tied the goat to a tree uphill. The roar of the tiger sounded closer to them in the meanwhile. Bheem climbed up the tree, while the other children ran towards the gudem. When he heard the animal behind him, Bheem turned to look. The tiger turned out to be both strong and immense. It looked at Bheem. Bheem jeered at it and threw twigs at it. He could not tell whether it was hungry or not, for it neither went to the goat nor did it move away from Bheem. Sitting at a distance from the teak tree Bheem had scaled, it looked at him and then at the bleating goat.

Meanwhile, the elders from the gudem came, making loud noises and beating drums. They held lit torches and carried axes, knives, and spears. They were fully prepared to defend themselves. Hearing the noise and commotion , the tiger tamely retreated. Kurdu lowered the rope he had brought into the tunnel, where Lacchu waited to be rescued. Lacchu held the rope and came out of the crevice easily. As soon as Lacchu joined them, all the children laughed and jumped with joy. They sang songs and returned to the gudem joyfully.

The elders appreciated Bheem's intelligence and quick thinking. Vadina heaped praise on him and sang Bheem's favourite song for him: "Kuse kuku... kuku."

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The harvest of the jowar crop was good. The seeds looked like white pearls. Looking at their farms, the gonds and kolams were overjoyed. The hunger that had persisted for years was going to be satiated at last. They could store enough food for the next six months.

Komuram Bheem loved to tell stories to his younger brothers and friends. He remembered all the stories that were told by Grandpa Motiram. Of all the stories, he liked to narrate the story of Ramji Gond the most.

One day, when he was retelling the story to his attentive audience, twelve people clad in white clothes entered the gudem. Before the people of the gudem could identify the visitors, one of them said, "Ram, Ram, Kurdu," and saluted.

Kurdu had seen that man once before. At some shop … of course! It was Lakshman Rao patwari.

Kurdu replied "Ram, Ram, patwari sir." (The gonds and kolams say 'Ram, Ram' frequently.)

After saying 'Ram, Ram', as well, the patwari pointed at the elephant-sized man sitting next to him and asked the people, "Do you know him?"

The people of the gudem said that they didn't. "He is Siddique Saab."

They said 'Ram, Ram' to the Muslim brother. The other people looked all around. The gudem people did not know why these strangers had come to their home.

Siddique went inside the bungalow in the middle of the gudem. He sat on a cot with his shoes on. It was against the custom of the gonds to enter the huts with footwear. Despite this, they refrained from saying anything. Yesu alone felt that his sensibilities were being hurt. Respectfully, he asked Lakshman Rao, "Why does the man go in with his footwear on?"

The gonds have another custom. Even if an emperor appears in front of them, they refer to him as 'man', and do not address him as 'sir'.

"He is used to this. All the lands cultivated by you belong to Siddique Saab. He owns all the lands from here to Keramere Hills. The Nizam's government allotted these lands to him long ago. You have cultivated these lands without his permission, and so have committed a grave crime. Because you are all illiterate and ignorant, he forgives you, considering that it is the first

time that you have erred. Henceforth you must all pay the land taxes," said Lakshman Rao.

After moving to the new land, they had worked hard. They had raised their crops. Wasn't it a grave injustice that these people came now and claimed the land as theirs? Under no circumstances could the land belong to anyone else but the gudem.

They responded to the accusation, frank and unwavering, "We are not here to pay any taxes to anybody."

Hearing this, Siddique came out of the hut. He ordered them, "Then all of you must immediately get out of this place. All these lands and crops are mine."

The men accompanying Siddique had come ready to loot whatever they could lay their hands on. They wanted to drink liquor, eat chicken and harass the villagers—this situation was an amusing aside of the daily lives of Siddique's men. But the gudem people were unafraid. They spoke firmly, mentally preparing themselves to fight if required.

Siddique's men thought, 'We shall beat them with batons to bring them to their senses.'

"We have worked very hard on these lands. We have raised the crops. If this land was yours, why did you not tell us in the beginning itself? Now we will not leave this land. We will not pay you any taxes," snapped Kurdu angrily.

"You fellows of the forest… should I come here and tell you that the land is mine? You blackguards!" With these words, Siddique slapped Kurdu on the cheek

The gonds and kolams rose as one, infuriated at the show of physical aggression against their leader. They attacked Siddique and his people. They beat the intruders with their own batons.

Every person in the gudem, man and woman, fought against Siddique's men as if it were a question of life and death. There were threats and screams—the gudem became a war zone. Seeing their boldness, Siddique's people were afraid. Patwari Lakshman Rao adjusted his clothes and readied himself to run. When he found an opportune moment to exit, he took to his heels and escaped along the side of the big stream.

Komuram Bheem encouraged his people to fight back. Their capacity and stamina to fight was no less than that of Siddique's followers.

There was a big baton in Siddique's grasp. He faced Kurdu but suddenly and stealthily moved behind Yesu, and lifted the baton to hit him hard on the head. Yesu would have died, were it not for Bheem, who saw Siddique's move. With the stick in his left hand, he checked the blow. With another baton in his right hand, he gave a severe blow to Siddique on the head. Siddique fell to the ground crying "Ya Allah!"

Bheem continued to beat Siddique with his batons, and because of the repeated and strong blows, Siddique died. On seeing their leader fall, his followers scurried away like rats fleeing a sinking ship, and disappeared from the scene as fast as they possibly could.

Only Siddique's dead body remained on the ground. Everybody knew what would happen next. The whole gudem dispersed in no time. Everyone ran away into the hills. Bheem had not expected Siddique to die. Siddique was a behemoth who ate meat and drank liquor. Bheem did not expect that such a man could die after just a few blows. While Bheem stood there, stunned and in shock, Kukubayi vadina came and shook him saying, "Bheem, why are you still here? Make haste to escape... we will meet later, run now. Soon many more of Siddique's followers will come. Run away from this place. It isn't safe for you here!"

Bheem ran. He crossed the stream and ran through the trees to the Neredu hills. Breathing hard, he collapsed and sat on a rock when he felt he had covered enough distance. He was fatigued

'Are these truly Siddique's lands? What is ownership? How does one gain it? Who is the Nizam to allot ownership? Why does he give it to others alone? Why don't the gonds ever get ownership? Why should they always rob us? Why did they not know that we are cultivating the lands? When they knew it, why did they not question us? Where is justice for us? Why did nobody tell Siddique he was at fault? What is government? Where is it? Will they keep quiet after what happened just now? The police may come! They may beat us all. They may beat Lacchu, Raghu, Somu, Madu and Pyku. I should not have run. Why did vadina tell me to get away? The police may beat her too!'

Filled with these agonising thoughts, Komuram Bheem looked towards the gudem. In the distance, he saw the flames of the burning huts. This persuaded him that there was no point in returning. If he was caught, he might also be put to death for killing Siddique, just like Ramji Gond in his grandfather's stories.

Getting up, he started walking slowly towards his old village, Sankenapelli. He had no other place to return to and knew no other way to move forward. Kondal and his family still lived there, having chosen not to migrate.

Bheem walked the entire night and the next day reached Sankenapelli by evening. His face was drawn due to lack of food and water, and his stomach ached. Before reaching the gudem, he saw Kondal sitting on a machaan in the

jowar farm. On seeing Bheem, Kondal came running towards him, surprised to see him. Bheem asked him to give him something to eat first before he told his tale.

Kondal plucked tender jowar ears from the field. He shelled the kernels, made a small fire under the mast and placed some pebbles on the fire. He roasted the kernels with hot pebbles in a bag. The roasted jowar seeds became soft, much like popcorn. In the meantime, Bheem had dozed off from fatigue. When the kernels were ready, Kondal woke him up and gave him some. Bheem's hunger was sated. After he ate, he told Kondal all that had happened.

The two friends slept on the mast in the field that night. When they woke up in the morning, the news of what had happened at Surdapur and the death of Siddique had somehow reached the gudem. On seeing Komuram Bheem,

Kondal's father Muthu, feared that there could be repercussions. Bheem did not want to remain at Sankenapalli any longer, and told Kondal this. Kondal also readied himself to leave with Bheem, as he felt that Bheem had fought well and rightly against injustice. He said that they would explain what had happened to their chieftain, the mukhasi. They had heard from Komuram Chinnu that the mukhasi resided near the great stream. He could be of some help if they confided in him, they thought.

"But do we know how to get there?" Kondal questioned Bheem.

"We will try to find the way, asking people as we go," Bheem replied.

Bheem and Kondal walked until dark. They passed through many gudems. Night fell upon them. They spent the night in a farmer's house and, at daybreak, continued their journey. The two asked directions from people along the way. On their way, they saw many new and strange things and came across people very different from their own.

At long last they reached the great stream. The sun had already set, and it was dark. The mukhasi owned many tiled houses. There was a large space around each house. The mukhasi also had many cows, buffaloes and goats. There were grass stacks and cattle sheds. The cattle sheds were of better quality than the huts of Bheem and his people. There were many labourers attending to the work. One of them approached Bheem and Kondal and asked them what they wanted. He gave them some food and showed them a place to sleep. They did not see the mukhasi that night.

In the morning, the same man came and escorted them to the mukhasi. Many women bustled about, busy attending to various kinds of work.

"Are all of them his servants?" Bheem asked the man. "Nay, they are all the wives of the mukhasi."

Although it was normal among the gonds to have two or three wives, Bheem and Kondal were astonished to see the mukhasi have as many as a dozen wives.

The mukhasi sat on a wooden swing. Bheem and Kondal respectfully greeted him, "Ram, Ram."

"Ram, Ram… Come and sit," said the mukhasi.

The two introduced themselves, mentioning the gudem they had come from.

"Yes, I know Komuram Chinnu. He was a good man," said the mukhasi.

Bheem explained how life for them in the forest was worse than that of animals. He narrated all their woes. He explained how the forest officials and the white-clothed merchant-money lenders hunted and killed the people of the gudem, "We have no power in our own place. We have no land for cultivation. When we cut the trees and bushes and prepare the ground with great effort for cultivation, somebody comes and says that the land belongs to him.

"My father told us about you. Grandpa Motiram used to tell us about you. Only you can help people like us. If you agree, we will unite all the people of all gudems. We will teach a lesson to the white-clothed people and the government just like Ramji Gond did," Bheem said enthusiastically.

"I know about your problems. What can we do? The government wants to make a profit from the forest. Forest officials must give a profit to the government. Where will they get it? Will they not fall back on us? Can we, the people, oppose such a mighty government? Bheem, you are a hot-blooded person. Don't be hasty. You are young. You have drawn the attention of the government by killing Siddique. You must adjust yourself to the circumstances and not show bravado. Can we fight like Ramji Gond? No, I do not think that I have such courage in me...," said the mukhasi slowly.

Bheem found it strange that, though a gond, the mukhasi had such cowardly thoughts. He was the chieftain of many gudems. Bheem had not expected the mukhasi to be cowardly. The discussion left him with a bad taste in his mouth and he wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"Then we will take our leave. Ram, Ram," said Bheem and got up.

Kondal also stood with him.

"Okay. Fell the forest again. Learn to live well," said the mukhasi finally.

'You are not the one who will teach us how to live. What do you know of our troubles?' Bheem thought to himself bitterly. They departed, their hopes dashed.

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After leaving the mukhasi's village, Bheem and Kondal did not know where to go next. They had no idea what to do. So they walked on whichever path lay in front of them, passing through many villages. They found the customs and cultures of those villagers quite different from their own. Unlike their women, some of the women in these unfamiliar gudems wore blouses. Their hairstyles were nothing similar to what Bheem and Kondal were used to. The language they spoke was also different.

Bheem and Kondal kept walking. Eventually, they grew hungry. The sun had sunk. They wished someone would spare them a few mouthfuls of food or a few pieces of bread. They drank water from a well. Seeing a farmer there, they asked him if he had any work for them.

"You should ask the patwari in the village, not me," said the farmer.

They met the patwari. He suspected they were thieves. Even so, he made them cut firewood into small pieces for domestic use. He then gave them some gruel and drove them away.

Bheem and Kondal were surprised at the attitude of the people. 'We do not even have proper clothes on our backs. How can we be thieves? Aren't the white-clothed people the real thieves?' they thought, baffled. They left the village and walked further. By and by they spotted a big town. This was Balharshah. The town had multi-storied buildings and wide roads. Bheem and

Kondal were flabbergasted. They had never seen such big houses and large shops. People wore a variety of strange looking, colourful clothes. There were also different types of vehicles. Not far away from the town, they also saw the railroad for the first time in their lives, and were astounded. They forgot hunger, thirst and sleep, seeing the new people and the novelties of the new place. They sat in the railway station. After a long time, a train came. Many people boarded the train. It started to move. "Why walk, let us also board the train," said Kondal. Both boarded the train before it picked up speed.

They enjoyed the rocking movement of the train, its speed and the sound. Bheem dozed off. After a while, he woke up and observed the people around chatting among themselves.

The train stopped. Seeing everyone getting down, Bheem and Kondal got down too. A man was asking every passenger something. They took time to comprehend what he wanted. They responded saying that they had no money with them. The ticket collector scolded them. He took the boys with him and handed them over to the police.

The police demanded to know who they were. They said that they were gonds. The police searched their pockets for money and found nothing. They became angry and beat them with batons. They then kicked them out of the station.

"We indeed had a free train ride! It is all right to get a few beatings in return," said Kondal, laughing.

"What is this town called?" wondered Bheem. He asked a passer-by in the gond language, "Which place is this?" The stranger looked blankly, failing to understand the language. Bheem knew a bit of Urdu. He asked the man again in Urdu. "Chanda", the passer-by responded, and went on his way.

Bheem and Kondal sat outside the railway station. A traveller was struggling to carry his luggage. Bheem went up to him and asked him, "May I carry your luggage, please?" He gave the luggage to Bheem. After reaching the traveller's house, Bheem and Kondal placed the luggage down. They saw some people in the house. They were working on machines. Bheem hoped that they might get some work there. He asked the traveller for work. Fortunately, the traveller had a dearth of hands to work under him. He seemed to know a bit of their language as well and understood their innocence. "Alright," he said, "I will give you work."

He was the owner of a printing press. His name was Vitoba.

Vitoba had connections with people who were fighting against the Nizam's government and the white men. This secret group sought to return each blow that they received from the government. They said that their fight was akin to an operation performed by a doctor and was therefore not violence. Vitoba, who had a secret liaison with this party, ran an underground press. On learning about this, Komuram Bheem realised that Vitoba was a good man. He decided to stay at the printing press for some time.

Komuram Bheem's thoughts and aspirations were in a league of their own. Kondal was unable to appreciate them fully. He found life at the press uncomfortable, and felt that he would not be able to stay there for long. With much hesitation, he conveyed his feelings to Bheem. Bheem sympathised with him and said, "Okay, you may return home." The very next day, he put Kondal on a train and sent him home.

Bheem stayed with Vitoba for a year. There, he learned to read and write in Telugu, Hindi, and English. Every day, Vitoba would find some time to teach Bheem. He taught him about politics as well. Bheem saw that Vitoba was always thinking about something. His pet phrase was that society must change and that everyone should be ready to sacrifice something for its betterment.

One night, a couple of policemen came and arrested Vitoba. The printed papers were confiscated. They also took Komuram Bheem into custody and questioned him. The next day, they released him from custody.

Komuram Bheem once again found himself on the streets. 'Will Vitoba be shot dead? Or hanged?' he wondered. He was filled with worry. But what could he possibly do to save him?

Bheem sat the whole day at the railway station. There, he met a man from the Nizam's lands. He said that he was from Mancherial and was a Telugu man. He also said that he was going to the tea gardens in search of a livelihood, as he had heard that the workers there were given good wages. Bheem had no second thoughts—he decided to accompany him to the 'land of the tea gardens'.

They were going to Assam.

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Soon after Komuram Bheem left Surdapur, where Siddique had been murdered, his uncles and brothers also left.

Kurdu collected the few belongings that were not destroyed by the fire. He put the items into the carts and departed the same night. After crossing the Keramere forests, he went to Jangubabu, the king of Pangadi. Jangubabu belonged to the clan of rulers. In ancient times, this area was a gond kingdom. Now, Jangubabu had no kingdom. But he had lands. Jangubabu welcomed Kurdu and showed him the lands. He entered into an agreement with him by which Kurdu could cultivate the lands on his own but should turn over half of the produce to Jangubabu. Kurdu had no alternative but to accept that condition.

After the departure of Kurdu, Komuram Bheem's brothers did not continue to live in Surdapur. They went in search of their livelihood, and went to Kalanwadi, in the state of Maharashtra.

What of Yesu? He went on foot towards Dhanora and saw a forest there. Learning that it did not belong to anybody, he felled the trees. He removed the stones and weeds and burnt the thickets to prepare the land for cultivation. He sowed the seeds in the rainy season. The land yielded a good crop. Once again, the forest inspector, the watchman and the sardar—all came on their horses. In the fight that ensued, they beat Yesu. Despite this, Yesu continued to stay there. He was dragged to the court of law.

He cultivated the lands once again, and harvested a good crop. The forest officials gave him plenty of trouble. They demanded a bribe of one hundred rupees for each acre of land. He had no choice but to yield to their demand. Each time the forest officials came to the gudem, they carried away his chickens and goats.

Thus, months and years rolled by.

It was during this time that Komuram Bheem had arrived at the tea gardens. There, he found many labourers just like him. The place was full of people from different backgrounds. From the time that he first became aware of the world beyond his native village until he reached the land of tea gardens, Bheem had been through innumerable experiences on his travels. He found himself thinking deeply—his thoughts and sentiments as complex as his experiences. He recalled the tears and hardships of the gudem people—his people. Bheem wandered all over the country and found that poor people everywhere lived in utter misery. The rich profited and enjoyed life to the fullest extent. The plight of labourers, regardless of location, was the same. They were unable to escape the hardship of poverty. The labouring people could not even fill their bellies, let alone find other amenities for life.

Bheem's thoughts galloped forward; his mind focused on the living conditions of his people and the poor, but he continued to pluck tea leaves in the gardens without lifting his bent back. Wages were paid daily. Sometimes they gave half a rupee as bonus, but it was back-breaking work for the labourers. It was considered a crime to even stand still and wipe the sweat on their brows. If anyone did so, their backs were lashed with whips. The supervisors, sitting astride horses, were bloodthirsty. The faces of the hard-working people were

pale and drained of blood. They were emaciated and bony, their chests pulled in. They became weaker day by day, as they had no time to recover from diseases. Many people died of deadly fevers. Although many people were dying, the rich owner of the plantation had no shortage of labourers. The day after the death of one labourer, a new person would arrive and join the workforce to take his place. Starvation killed many as well. After meeting the medical expenses, the labourers were left with very little of their hard-earned money, barely enough to purchase food.

In those tea gardens of Assam, Komuram Bheem worked for more than four years.

One day, when it was time for Bheem to retire to bed, he sat conversing with a fellow labourer. The man was a Telugu-speaking man from Manyam and had come to the tea estate relatively recently. He had the moustache and demeanour of a Telugu man and was fluent in the language. He was bold and outspoken. Amid the conversations, Bheem asked him, "Where is Manyam, my friend?"

The man twisted his moustache, and laughed. "Aren't you a Telugu man? Don't you know that the land of Manyam is in the kingdom of the Nizam? Have you not heard of the tribal rebellion? Don't you know the story of Manyam's hero Alluri Seetharama Raju?" he asked.

Komuram Bheem said that he did not know any of these things. He added, however, that he wanted to learn. Not only Bheem but many other labourers also sat there around the man from Manyam. Bheem asked him to tell them the story of Alluri Seetharama Raju.

The man from Manyam narrated the story.

"We were born and raised in the forests. Our forefathers, too, lived and died in the forests. We felled the forest and did podu farming. We hunted the wild animals for their meat. The forest produced foods such as fruits, vegetables and honey, all of which were the gifts of Mother Forest. When the white men came, they spoilt our happy lives. They tried to distance us from our mother. They found fault with us even if we bent a twig, and they cut our legs for bending a branch. If anybody plucked the leaves of the trees, his hands were cut off. Our people were locked up in jails. The white men forcibly carried them away to enslave them and put them to work.

"This was when Alluri Seetharama Raju came to us. He said that all this was unjust. He said agriculture was our livelihood. He reminded us that the forest belonged to us. He said hunting was our birthright. He also said that if our livelihood and right to live were obstructed, it was then our birthright to resist.

"Alluri went from village to village; he walked just as Ramji Gond had done, from gudem to gudem. He said we should liberate Mother Forest from the clutches of the foreigners. 'Gird your loins!' said Alluri Sitaramaraju.

"The tribals were awakened. We proclaimed that the forest was ours and nobody had the right to enter it."

Bheem looked at him with bated breath, the story filling him with joy. Here was another leader who had stood by his people and against the invaders, just like Ramji Gond! The man from Manyam continued his narration.

"Do you know what happened next? The white men lost sleep. Their very existence was threatened. Of course, they did not remain quiet in the face of our resistance. Soon, they sent the police and the army into the forest. Do you know what we did in turn? As soon as the white men entered the forest, we killed each one of them. The thickets, trees, rocks and hillocks of the forest came to our aid. We attacked them from the valleys and from the bends of the hills. We drove them back. They retraced their steps, unable to withstand our attack."

"How could you face them when they had the power of guns?" asked Bheem, stunned.

"Let them have their guns! They are nothing before our bows, arrows and bludgeons! How is this possible, you ask? Let us say four fellows aim their guns in one direction. From atop a hill, hidden in their blindspot, if we hurl down a big rock, their guns become ineffective. We secured guns. Do you want to know how? The enemy gave them to us themselves. It was easy. We attacked their police stations—we destroyed their police camps and captured their arms. We even made a few guns ourselves.

"Seetharama Raju trained our youth in the art of fighting. He showed us how to resist the police. He explained to us the tactics and methods of harassing the enemy and ultimately defeating them. He planted secret agents in each one of the villages. He arranged to secretly collect information through them. We declared we would rule the country ourselves.

"We never allowed the white troops to come into our forests. We gave them no time to breathe. We pounced on them, in wave after wave of attacks, and scared them away. The Englishmen shook in their boots. They felt that they had no alternative but to leave the place. They played all sorts of crooked tricks on us and hatched a conspiracy. They came to the conclusion that if they wanted to survive, Seetharama Raju had to be killed. They held discussions with their people in England. Do you know that a hero does not cheat, and only cowards play tricks. They arrested Seetharama Raju stealthily. But he refused to bow his head before them. He refused to plead for his life. Remember, a hero is always a hero. He said that it was wrong to torture his followers. He bared his chest before their cannons and asked them to shoot him instead if they wished. He said that shedding a drop of the blood of our men will, in turn, create a thousand people like him. Today, the Englishmen think that Seetharama Raju is no more. But they do not see that he is alive in the hearts of each and every one of the tribals. If we want to live like human beings, we should take back the forests. If we want to rule our land ourselves in the forests, there is no other way but to fight the enemies. That is the eternal message of Alluri Seetharama Raju to us."

All were silent. The man from Manyam finished his story. Komuram Bheem wanted to hear more. He wanted to know more details about the struggle.

Many more months rolled by. The supervisors, who were faithful servants of the tea garden owners, harassed and tortured the innocent labourers. It seemed there was no end to this. One day, two supervisors started beating the labourers with whips. An anguished Bheem intervened to demand the reason for the whipping. They turned their whips on Bheem instead. This move enraged him. He pulled the whips from their hands and beat them severely. They ran away in fear and reported this to their masters. The owner sent many policemen. They took Bheem and twenty other labourers into their custody, beat them severely and then put them in jail.

Three days passed. On the fourth day, with the help of other convicts in the jail, Bheem bent the iron rods of the cell and walked out. Could a jail compound wall stop one who could bend iron rods? He jumped over the wall, and came into the open, unseen by anybody. After walking a long distance, he reached the railway station once more. A goods train was ready to depart. Anything would do, he told himself. He got into a cabin and lay down. He fell fast asleep. When he woke up and looked around, he saw that he had reached Balharshah.

He stayed in Balharshah for some days, carrying head loads, but he did not wish to live there long. His people, his gudems, his hills and the forest itself seemed to be calling him home. He left Balharshah and travelled in the direction of the forest touching Rajora until darkness began to descend. At night, he slept in a gudem in the forest. There, one of the gonds told him that his brothers were in Kakanghat.

It was evening the next day. Birds were flying back to their nests. The cattle were returning to their sheds. The shadows under the trees were growing longer. Komuram Bheem reached his elder brother's gudem in Kakanghat before night. Somebody directed him to Somu's house. When he went to the hut, his vadina Kukubayi came to meet him. She was greatly surprised to see Bheem alive and well. There stood an exuberantly youthful and strong Bheem. Was it really the same child, the same Komuram Bheem that she had known before? Bheem was bright like the full moon and shining like the morning sun. Kukubayi was overjoyed. Her eyes filled with tears, and she was struck speechless. She ran inside to wake her mother-in-law, who was lying on a cot. Kukubayi told her that Bheem had returned. His mother stepped out of the hut immediately. She held Bheem in her arms and wept. Bheem could see she was nearing her death. The charm and brightness in his dear vadina's face was also gone. Her body had become bony and dark.

"Bheem, why did you come back? I wished that you would live happily somewhere else, free from hunger and destitution!" exclaimed his vadina.

As Bheem watched her, he sensed a motherly love in her. He remembered all the stories she had told him, and the songs she had sung for him. He wanted to speak with her, but was unable to say anything.

Even so, he managed to ask, "Vadina, do the gonds truly have a place which is free from poverty and destitution?"

Bheem held his arms out and beckoned the children in the hut to come to him. Vadina told her two sons and the baby, "Go to him, dear ones, he is your uncle." They rushed into the circle of his arms at once.

After eating soup in the night, his elder brothers asked him to tell them about his journey. Bheem shared his experiences in detail. He described all the hardships he had faced. Then Bheem asked his brothers about the happenings at home. He learned from them the whereabouts of his uncles, Kurdu and Yesu.

He learnt what Kondal was doing. He enquired about each one of his friends and learnt of how they were faring.

The next day, his elder brother, Somu, took him to the nearby village of Devadam. The chief of Devadam was Lacchu Patel.

Bheem was now employed by this chief. He brought many changes in the style of farming that Lacchu Patel used. He suggested introducing commercial crops like chilli and cotton. Patel was mightily pleased with him. He was convinced that Bheem was intelligent and capable of solving the problems that plagued Devadam's community. In this manner, several months went by.

One day, Lacchu Patel called Bheem. He showed him the land adjacent to his own and said, "This is a twelve-acre plot. I have had it cultivated. I informed the forest officials of what I wanted to do. I also bribed the watchman and the sardar. A few days ago the inspector came to inspect the forest. Now he has registered a case against me. There is no basis for this case . I do not know Urdu. Will you go to Jangaon and speak to the inspector on my behalf? Please see to it that the land is allotted to me. I will bear all the expenses."

Bheem heard him out and understood the case. He started out for Jangaon to resolve the problem.

On reaching Jangaon, Komuram Bheem went to meet the inspector. He introduced himself as Lacchu Patel's righthand man. Bheem explained that he had travelled all over the country. His confident speech ensured that the inspector was willing to converse with him. Hearing Bheem speaking fluent Urdu, the inspector treated him with a modicum of respect. Bheem explained the case relating to Lacchu Patel's cultivated plot in detail. The inspector called for the file and re-examined the matter. While doing so, he seriously considered maintaining a good relationship with Lacchu Patel. To prevent the gonds from felling the forest, the inspector concluded that he should keep Lacchu Patel under his leash. Hence, he thought it prudent to dismiss the case.

"The government will consider this to be the first mistake of Lacchu Patel. In this case, it will pardon him this once. Ask him to come and meet me," the inspector declared.

Bheem was successful in his endeavour. Lacchu Patel thanked and appreciated him profusely. This news spread to the other villages and many people came to Bheem with their land disputes. Bheem met the inspector

again. The inspector did not always acquiesce and sometimes scolded him and sent him back.

Another man named Ambatirao had previously looked after the affairs of Lacchu Patel before Bheem did. He had a daughter named Sombayi. Lacchu Patel asked Ambatirao to consider the marriage of Sombayi to Bheem, as he believed they would make a good pair.

He called for Somu and Bojju and told them about this proposal.

They responded positively to the idea. Bheem also agreed.

The wedding ceremony of Komuram Bheem and Sombayi was held at Devadam. It was a grand function. Bheem's vadinas, Kukubayi and Radhabayi, found a companion in Sombayi. Together, Bheem and Sombayi set up their family in Kakanghat.

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At Pangadi, Kurdu was unable to continue staying with Jangubabu. Along with his family, he went to his younger brother, Yesu, at Dhanora. He felt as he did before—that he should fell the trees in the forest, and cultivate the land, as their ancestors had done before them. He went to different gudems, looking for a viable location. Adjacent to the Babejhari stream was a good piece of land for cultivation. He sought his nephew's help to tame the land. Bheem brought many people together for the task. The sound of axes falling on the shrubs and bushes of Babejhari reverberated through the forest. The once impregnable forest was felled at last and turned into cropland.

Babejhari, Chalbaridi, Goginmovadam, Toyicanmovadam, Bheemangondi, Kallegaon, Murikilonka, Ankusapur, Narsapur, Demdiguda, Jodeghat, and Patnapur—in all, twelve gudems were built. They raised pandals, constructed lofts, erected masts, and laid huge logs across the streams. They hoisted bethal flags. They built temples to the deity, Jangubayi. Thus, they started their new lives.

A new season had arrived.

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Bheem needed to begin his journey to the market—a bustling hub within the verdant forests that acted as the centre for the gudems surrounding it. This year's tobacco harvest needed to be sold and with that in mind he loaded up a cart and headed on his way.

The oxen clopped their way on paths cut through by many others. Traders, officials, and the like worked their way through the forests: some to take the gonds' money and others to impose arbitrary rules on the use of the forests.

When Bheem reached the market, it was afternoon. The moon would rise through the night sky by the time he returned home.

He went immediately to the tobacco shop to sell his crop. The weighing and calculation happened before his eyes and his focus shifted from the plight of his people to that of his own profit for working the land.

When the sun was setting and they had given Bheem his money, he heard a young woman's screams pierce the air. He turned around startled to look and felt it was coming from behind the tobacco shop where he had just been.

Although every impulse in him told him to wait and identify the source of that scream, he glanced quickly at the darkening sky. It was already late and as the market was an area that the youth of all the surrounding gudems frequented, he thought it might just be some children playing a game.

He returned to his oxen cart and climbed on to it. The stars would be twinkling soon, so he was in some haste to start on his way back. When he was clear of the tobacco stall, a young girl raced her way through the crowd, sprinting and weaving through the crowd. She saw Komuram Bheem's cart and like a dart, climbed aboard.

Bheem jerked his head back and pulled hard on the reins, forcing the oxen to halt. He saw the beautiful girl who would soon inspire him to make the revolutionary moves that defined him in history books. Her name was Pykubayi.

She stared at the man and hoped her choice was a good one.

With pleading eyes, Pykubayi begged, "Please! Please go! They are chasing me!"

Bheem kicked the oxen into movement, and they were soon past the edge of the market, where it was relatively safe. He leaned back and looked once more at this scared girl who was riding with him.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

Pykubayi jumped out of her skin and turned her cautious eyes to Bheem. She said in a trembling voice, "I'm fine. I came to the markets to spend time with my friends, and I got lost. I did not know where they were, so as I was walking around looking for them, when a bunch of the forest officials grabbed me. They took me to the back of the tobacco shop and tried to rape me. I kicked one of them, slapped another, and finally escaped."

Bheem was shocked; this woman had the guts to slap and kick the forest officials!

He smiled at her story and then pulled at the ropes to make the oxen stop. Since they were far enough from the markets he asked her to get off.

"What? I don't know where I am! How can you ask me to get down like this? Which village are you from?"

"I belong to Devadam near Kakanghat. My name is Komuram Bheem."

Pykubayi's eyes went wide. "Oh! Are you that Komuram Bheem," she gasped, very pleased. She jumped about enthusiastically and said, "I have heard many people talk about you. I have heard that you have travelled through many parts of the country! My name is Pykubayi. I will go to my village tomorrow

morning. Please keep moving for now. I don't want to get in trouble with the forest officials again."

Bheem, not knowing what to say, decided to drive the oxen. If she wanted to stay a night and then head back tomorrow, he had no problem with that.

They both began to observe each other, although in a secretive way so that the other would not notice. Bheem studied the woman and thought to himself how strong she must be of mind and heart to hit the forest officials! He chuckled to himself at her audacity.

Pykubayi also studied the legend she had heard of from her gudem's people. This was the man whom everyone talked about. The man had seen more parts of the country than any one of her people and had stood up to the government in the courts. He looked strong, intelligent and was forthright; there was nothing hidden behind his words. It was these qualities that pushed her to propose to him on that journey home.

"I have no one in this world. My mother and father are both gone, and my uncle is the only one around, but he abuses me. I leave nothing behind when I ask to you marry me. I will stay with you," said Pykubayi.

Bheem was taken aback. Shocked, he chose not to say anything, but there stood in the back of his mind a little knocking thought. The lady had stood up for herself and the pride he felt in her actions overwhelmed him. If he had any chance of fighting for his people, she would be an ally he could rely on. Inwardly, Bheem thought, 'She says that she is an orphan. But she can kick people like forest sergeants. She must be a very brave girl indeed.'

In gond culture, polygamy was not looked down upon. Marrying a few wives was an accepted cultural practice, so there was very little that could stop him from saying yes. He trusted that Sombayi would also agree.

Soon after reaching home, amidst the fires that the gudem had lit to keep warm, he told Sombayi, "Somi! I have brought you a younger sister."

Sombayi was initially shocked. Even so, she observed Pykubayi carefully and sized her up. It was only after this that she welcomed her with pleasure. Sombayi was aware of the cultural practices of her community and could not afford to be upset by this new development. The very next day, Komuram Bheem married Pykubayi.

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Several weeks passed by.

"In Babejhari, the gonds and kolams have established twelve villages." This news spread across the land. The gond people felt exhilarated. However, soon, the government moved to curb this enthusiasm. Kurdu and Yesu's petitioning efforts did not bear any fruit. Once again, the forest officials came and attacked them. They beat many people and burnt down the gudems, registering cases against all of its members. To embolden the dejected villagers, Kurdu announced, "This is not unusual. If we want to live our lives as we please, we cannot avoid suffering. If they burn our huts, let us re-build them. Don't be afraid. Whatever they do, they cannot take away our lands! The cases? Let them foist as many as they please. To look after those affairs, let us bring our very own Bheem, who is now with Lacchu Patel. He will solve them all."

Kurdu and Yesu went to Devadam and spoke to Bheem. Bheem said that he understood the issue. He knew that their troubles were an outcome of generations of suffering. He was aware as to how much the Nizam's kingdom was cheating his people. The mukhasis were only interested in their lives of luxury. It was inevitable that the gonds and kolams had to struggle for themselves.

Bheem took leave of Lacchu Patel. He discussed the matter with his elder brothers. He talked to his vadinas. After talking to his mother, and accompanied by his wives, he started on his new journey.

Komuram Bheem went towards Babejhari and halted at a gudem called Toyikan. The elder there, Shidangannu, greeted him with the customary "Ram, Ram". He arranged accommodation for Bheem's family in a hut. Within ten days of his arrival, Bheem went to each one of the gudems and listened to the problems of his fellowmen. He understood the hardships that they were forced to face because of the forest officials. The question that faced Bheem after the discussions was what to do next.

Emboldening her husband, Bheem's second wife, Pykubayi, said, "We came here to solve the problems of these people. Tell them that the cases registered against them stand no ground. The people of twelve villages have worked hard to cultivate these lands. If they believe that their labour belongs to them, then they will persevere to safeguard their crops. Nobody can snatch the crop or the land from them.

"If we are bold, can't we prevent the forest guards from crossing the big stream? There is nothing to fear. Think of the work to be done, and not of

saving or losing the lands! First, inquire about the gravity of the cases filed. If we can appoint an advocate, then we will not have to worry about them."

Bheem thought that Pykubayi's advice was sound. He discussed this with his uncle as well.

"We need a person to look after our correspondence from this moment onwards. Go meet Mahadu. He is in Vayudam, a village of Patnapur. It will be good if you can go along with Mahadu and meet advocate Pykaji Ramachandra Rao at Jangaon," said Kurdu.

Komuram Bheem went to find Mahadu and, accompanied by him, reached Jangaon. There they met Pykaji Ramachandra Rao. Bheem spoke to him, explaining how, from the time of their forefathers, they were living as dependents of the land. Now their troubles had become too numerous to continue facing without resistance. The gonds were deprived of all their rights and were being driven away. Was this not unjust? Why should anyone seize their rights? These were the questions that Bheem posed to the advocate.

Pykaji explained, trying to make Bheem understand, "Bheem, what you have said is true. They were your lands, and you were the kings. But when? That was before the year 1918. Until then, the government had not declared its authority over the forests. In 1918, the forest officers came to Utnoor. When they came to know of this, the Raos, Brahmins, and Muslims also came to the forests from many different places. Somehow, they established contact with the government. Consequently, they were allotted lands. Your people were not. And so you lost the rights over the land. Now, the law protects them instead."

Bheem became enraged. "Who made these laws? Why did they allot the lands to those thieves? Who was consulted when our lands were written away in their names?" he questioned.

"Nobody has asked these questions in all these years. You are the first one to do so, Bheem. Now the kingdom belongs to the Nizam. He will do as he pleases. That is his will and pleasure."

"Why should there be such a king? What is the use of a king who cannot uphold justice?"

"Bheem, to tell you the truth, the kings are not concerned with justice for the people. What they want is money. It is the police, the chieftains, the officers

and the laws that procure them this money. Who cares about the problems of the people? And, for that matter, what is the use of all this talk of the past now? Pay attention to the cases against your people. That is the primary issue to focus on."

"Pykaji, tell me! Can a government that desires our death be ours? Are those that drain our blood not our enemies?"

"Look, Komuram Bheem! Don't force me to use harsh words. Go to the Nizam and try to petition him about your troubles. Maybe some good may come of it! If you don't want to do this, you may challenge the government of the Nizam. Say that you don't recognize their laws, their courts and their corrupt officers. If you say that, you will have to be a rebel and be ready to fight. The brash way you speak makes me say these things, but think on this for a while first. Can you truly fight against the Nizam to secure your ancestral lands? I don't think so. Do whatever pleases you," said the advocate Pykaji Ramachandra Rao, helpless in the face of Bheem's ardour for the freedom of his people.

Bheem's face went red with anger. He thought that Pykaji underestimated the gonds. Once again, Bheem recalled the story of Ramji Gond. Let them do what they want with all the cases, he thought to himself, incensed. Bidding farewell to Pykaji, Bheem reminded him, "We will come whenever we need you. Please, help us then."

Taking his leave with these words, Bheem, along with Mahadu, started walking to reach his gudem.

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Now Bheem understood the situation completely. He wanted the people of all twelve villages to assemble. He sent Raghu to call Komuram Suru, the messenger. He already had Kurdu, Yesu and Mahadu with him. As soon as Suru came, Bheem asked him to spread the message that the people of the twelve gudems should come to Patnapur. The drum was sounded and the message broadcast to the entire community.

All their people came forward, responding to Bheem's call and assembled under a big tree. Bheem addressed them:

"Farmers! I have come here to speak on behalf of all of you. I know your troubles. If we fell the forest for cultivation, the government and the land allottees will find fault with us. As we have no other means of livelihood, we must bear with the cases filed against us. No matter what they do to us, whether they beat us or burn our huts or chop off our hands, we must cultivate our lands in these forests. We must not forget that our will is one and that our uncles established these twelve villages. Our strength is great, but we lack the resources to fight the cases the government foists on us. The advocate asks us to come to court. We, who barely survive on gruel, are being dragged close to death by

these cases. The court will not solve our problems. Please, listen to me—the rainy season fast approaches. Let us plough the lands in all gudems. They will try to foist more cases on us. I say, let them! Whether we like it or not, ultimately, they will wage war against us. At some point, we will have to take a stand. Don't we protect our crops from wild animals? Similarly, let us fight against these thieves and secure our rights. This is the only way to secure our lands! Do you agree with me?" asked Bheem, his voice raised to reach the entire gathering.

"We must fight. Let us die fighting, rather than die of hunger," some youths shouted in response.

The words of agreement reverberated through the crowds. Someone said they would need guns. And someone else wondered, what of ammunition? Raghu raised his voice and said, "When we get ready for war, all will come." Jangu responded, "Only after the birth of the child are clothes stitched; first fell the forest."

If Bheem was not great, could he have travelled all over the country? Did he not secure the land of Lacchu Patel? Did he not defeat Pykaji with his arguments? His people believed that if he was determined, he could achieve anything.

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That year, the farmers felled the trees in the forests and raised their crops. For some reason, the forest officials did not appear. Some people thought that they did not come fearing Bheem, and others thought that, henceforth, they need not worry about them. However, Bheem had his own apprehensions. The government continued to pursue cases against the tribals.

After some months went by, the forest officials came with a great force to Babejhari. The most important among them were the inspector, the watchman, the sardar, the girdavar and the patwari, Sitarama Rao. Some came riding on horses while others came in carts. When they halted at Toyikan, Kurdu and the other villagers greeted them.

The inspector said, "You seemed to have felled the forest again. We have come to make an on-the-spot inquiry." He turned to the others saying, "Move to the place of the forest felling."

"Make inquiries, foist cases, and then what more can you do?" Bheem questioned him directly.

"Despite the prohibition, you fell trees in the forest," snapped the inspector angrily. Then he started to verbally abuse them.

"This is our forest; we will do what we want. It is better that you stop robbing us. From this moment onwards, we refuse to bribe you with goats, sheep and chicken. You will stop taking away our wealth. Stop your thieving and don't make thieves of us," said Bheem firmly.

The inspector was already angry. Now, this fellow, Bheem, was speaking without any fear. The inspector's anger was magnified.

"You gond rascal! How dare you call us thieves?" with that, he slapped Bheem on the face.

As soon as the inspector hit Bheem, his assistants began beating the gonds. This was enough to provoke Raghu to beat the drum and alert their people. In no time, the gonds and kolams rushed onto the scene. They resisted the forest officials, and the place soon turned into a war zone. The gonds gave the forest officials a tough fight. Fearing that the situation was getting out of hand, one of the officials fired a gun, wounding Bheem. The bullet pierced Bheem's shoulder,

and his blood spattered all over the ground. The attack on Bheem ignited the gond resistance further and they beat the enemy severely. The forest officials, unable to bear the ferocity of the resistance, retreated in the direction of Jangaon.

A few days later, when Kurdu and his sons went to a shop in the town, the police were waiting for them. They immediately arrested them. When he learnt what had happened, Bheem wrote a letter to Lacchu Patel of Devadam, and ensured that they were released on bail.

Without any further delay, the forest inspector and the girdavar met the tahsildar, Abdul Sattar. The inspector then explained what happened at Babejhari in detail.

"The gonds, who can no longer afford food, have become a threat to the government. If the government delays its response any further, there will be great civil danger," said the inspector.

On hearing his words, Abdul Sattar immediately spoke to the District Police Officer and said that the gonds must be arrested. He also wrote to the Home Secretary in Hyderabad, outlining what had happened in the hills.

The District Police Officer filed cases stating that the gonds had felled the forest and violently attacked forest officials at Babejhari. Komuram Bheem was cited as the first accused and Mahadu, Raghu, Jangu, Kurdu, Yesu and Suddu were targeted as the co-accused. The District Police Officer intended to go with a big force to arrest the entire group of people and wondered how to raise such a force.

One day, during these tumultuous times, Bheem found Kurdu sitting alone, pained and disturbed. He asked, "Uncle! What is troubling you?"

Kurdu replied, "Bheem, all through our lives, we have been engaged in conflict. The cases against us are increasing day by day. We don't know whether the government knows about the misconduct of the forest officials. Maybe the government is good. It may be useful if you go and talk directly to the Nizam. He may take pity on us after hearing about our troubles!"

Hearing these words Pykubayi laughed privately to herself.

Bheem was stumped, unable to say anything in response.

"Why ignore the advice of our elders? Let it be done, and then we will know the truth!" exclaimed Pykubayi.

Bheem agreed and started on the journey to Hyderabad. Mahadu and Raghu accompanied him. In a letter, they explained the problems they faced living in the forests. They said that only the Nizam could come to their rescue and requested his support.

As Bheem narrated the events, Mahadu included the details of the corruption and exploitation by jagirdars and the foisting of false cases in their letter to the Nizam.

After reaching Hyderabad, they waited from morning till evening to meet the Nizam. Bheem pleaded with the officers, saying that they had travelled a long distance. Mahadu, too, pleaded with the officers for an audience with the Nizam. All their pleading fell on deaf ears. Nobody cared for them, refusing to even recognise them as human beings. Seeing the futility of their attempts, they returned home.

Before Komuram Bheem returned from Hyderabad, the police raided the gudems again. Kurdu Patel, the chief of Jodeghat village, had cooperated with the police. The villagers were shaken. The police beat up all those they could lay hands on. Komuram Kurdu, Yesu, Suru and Madu were badly beaten, arrested, and taken away. Bheem learned of these events as soon as he returned from Hyderabad. He left for Jodeghat immediately and organised a meeting there.

At the meeting, Bheem spoke to the people:

"Do you see what horrors the forest officials have perpetrated on you by the time we returned from Hyderabad? They have rained poison on our gudems. There, the Nizam enjoys himself and feasts. He has surrounded himself with the police to ensure his protection. While here, our people are being killed. His ministers and officers are thieves. They cheat us. They kick us and will continue to do so.

"Dear farmers, please do think hard! They don't let us live in peace, but we must continue to live. This air, this sky, this forest and the land are ours. They should belong to us. The wolf that has tasted our blood does not allow us to live freely. It refuses to let us keep our land. This government will come again the next time with their police strength doubled and burn our gudems. Please tell me, should we die in those flames? What should we do?" he questioned them directly.

"Let us revolt and put an end to this exploitation," said one of the people present.

"Not only us, not only the people of these twelve villages, but all the tribes must also come together. All the tillers of the land should unite as one. If we are to get our land, we have to fight. Let no forest official, or police officer or land allotee come into our lands. We shall have to teach them a lesson that they will never forget, so that they never return to our lands" said another.

"Brother Bheem, let us die in battle rather than be deprived of our lands!" roared hundreds of voices together.

"We shall wage war. We shall fight like Ramji Gond and win a war. Let us all unite and rebuild Jodeghat. Our immediate task is to get our arrested people released. Mahadu will speak to the advocate and get that done," said Bheem.

The elders of the twelve gudems were present for the meeting. The people of the gudems were also there. After discussing the matter with everyone, Bheem drew up a plan for them to follow.

"First, we should get the arrested people at Jodeghat released. The village of Jodeghat will act as the centre of all the villages. The cost of food and arms shall be borne by all the gudems. The drum should be our symbol. Every village should worship the cudgel. That means everyone should pray to a cudgel as tall as they are and always keep it beside them. Axes, spears, bows and arrows, slings and guns should be made post-haste. Our army will be stationed at Jodeghat. There will be security guards in the villages. There should be a person to work as a courier in each one of the villages. We should inform the government that we will not appear in court for any of the cases that have been made against us. We will openly declare that all the land of the forests belongs to the gonds and kolams. We must declare that the fight will go on until the government cedes our lands back to us. All of us must work secretly and swiftly. The establishment of the kingdom of the gonds is our aim. Our flag will bear the emblem of the burning torch."

The representatives of the twelve villages decided that these affairs would be finalised amongst the twelve chieftains alone. And so, Mahadu went to Jangaon.

At Jangaon, Mahadu met Pykaji and spoke to him. Pykaji had a long talk with the tahsildar. In turn, the tahsildar wrote a letter to the Director General of Revenue in Hyderabad. In the letter, he stated, "If we show pity to the accused, the prestige of our government will be enhanced. Komuram Bheem's words have enticed them. Please, pardon these people."

In this fashion, the arrested people were released. They, too, reached Jodeghat.

A month passed by. No one from the Babejhari area attended the cases in court. Accompanied by the police, the inspector proceeded there with a government order. With much difficulty, their horses climbed up the hills of Jodeghat. They met Bheem and gave him the summons, asking him to attend the court sessions.

"Why do you still pursue these cases? These twelve villages belong to us. This is the kingdom of the gonds. Maybe your government is still ignorant about this! If the forest officials come here, I promise you that they will not return alive. This is our kingdom, and you have no authority here. We have not wronged anyone, and we are not eating any else's food. We are not unjust to anybody. This kingdom has been approved by all of us. You may go and appeal to whomever you wish," said Komuram Bheem, steadfast in his words.

Pykubayi as well as the other women clapped their hands. The inspector did not want to go back empty-handed. He persisted in trying to take them to court, warning them and, as a last resort, fired his gun in the air. The gonds were amused and smiled at one another. They beat the inspector and his companions. They snatched his gun and drove them away. Until that point, Kurdu Patel who had helped the inspector in Jodeghat was now warned never to act dishonourably again.

A furnace was lit in the warzone of Jodeghat. Axes, spears, bludgeons, bows and arrows and the barrels of guns were being made. Those who knew how to use the weapons explained it to the youth and children. The training had started. Women, too, helped. Pykubayi was at the forefront of the women involved.

Some villages assumed a new look. Other villages came to know about the leadership of Komuram Bheem. They, too, felt the need to join the twelve villages. Chief amongst them were Kallempad and Dhanora. From further away, some of the people of the valley, too, arrived. They cheered and hailed the establishment of the gond kingdom. People who were opposed to the Nizam's government and the anarchy of the jagirdars came to ground zero with a sense of sacrifice.

In the meanwhile, Komuram Bheem sent his message to all the villages. Komuram Suru read out the message:

"If we want to retain our lands for ourselves, then we must put a stop to the exploitation by the forest officials and the government. We must gain authority over the forest. This authority will not appear by itself. To gain authority, we have to wage a war and defeat the government. If our people make up their minds, then there is nothing that will be out of our reach. Therefore, join the army. Raise

and hail our flag with the symbol of the torch. We will achieve our own liberation—let us fight for our kingdom together! There will be death and destruction in the war, but we die so that our people can live a better life in the future. Our sacrifice is for our own good and it will ensure a better life for our children in the days to come. At least they will be able to live better lives than us. Either way, the days of dying of hunger have come to an end. If we die in this fight, we will get our kingdom. To return and secure land to the tiller, we must wage a war. Oh, mothers! We, your children, have endeavoured to shoulder this heavy duty. Please bless us with all your hearts."

One morning, on the hills of Jodeghat, the drum sounded. It marked the auspicious time for the start of the struggle. The people of every village hailed Komuram Bheem. They hailed the flag of the flaming torch. Bheem convened a meeting and addressed the people who had gathered together as one. Everyone was full of enthusiasm. Musicians played on various instruments. Some people beat the big drum while others beat the flat drums. The flag with the flaming torch was hoisted high in the trees. Women gathered in a circle and danced.

At that time, Komuram Suru came running to the centre of the congregation and informed them about the arrival of the Nizam's soldiers, who were marching into their territory. Instantly, Bheem raised his gun and proclaimed the start of the war. Trumpets were sounded and the drums were beaten.

"Don't allow even a single soldier of the Nizam to climb the Jodeghat plateau. Fill the guns with ammunition, draw the bowstrings, aim and release your arrows. Encircle them on three sides and slash them with swords. This land is ours. This forest is ours. Destroy the enemy!"

Bheem's words stirred the people into a frenzy. The warzone reverberated with action. Men and women took up arms. Pykubayi advanced forward like a great tigress, a heroine with no fear.

There were sounds of guns from both sides. There were also agonised cries of death. Not even one of the Nizam's soldiers could climb up the hill. Anyone who tried was killed. Due to the all-round attack of the gond army, the Nizam's army was trapped. Faced with inevitable defeat, their captain ordered the army to run away and retreat shouting, "Bhago, Bhago" in Urdu!

Bheem's side reverberated once more with the sounds of drums, now a mark of their resounding victory.

The news of Komuram Bheem's victory spread to all the gudems in the forest. "The Nizam's army was made to bite the dust. This was done by a gond youth named Komuram Bheem."

The gonds danced and celebrated with joy. In every village, they hoisted their flags.

When the tahsildar learnt of the gond victory, he boiled with rage. He went to Warangal and met with the subedar, his superior officer. Similarly, he went and spoke to the police officer at Jangaon (Asifabad).

"This is an important issue related to land. We must discuss the subject with the gonds and resolve it," said the tahsildar.

On the same day, the news that Komuram Bheem had waged a war and had driven away the government soldiers, reached Hyderabad. The Home Secretary sat with the Nizam. They discussed plans for a potential solution to this problem. A big army had to be sent to suppress the gonds. The English officer held parleys with the Nizam. In these meetings, he advised the Nizam on the matter of gond resistance: "The rebellion of the gonds must be nipped in the bud. On one side, the Hindus, and on the other, the communists, are becoming stronger. Do you want to add tribal troubles to the problems faced by your kingdom? If you don't suppress this struggle immediately, it will eventually endanger your seat of power. We faced immense difficulties to kill Alluri Seetharama Raju. Please, don't delay. Kill them all."

As a part of his battle strategy, the Nizam first instructed his army to attack the people at the foothills. In the meantime, the police, Muslim jagirdars and the forest officials jointly created turmoil in the villages surrounding Babejhari. They robbed the people and burnt the villages. They resorted to beating and killing the villagers. Unable to bear this injustice, more and more people started joining Komuram Bheem's army.

Four months sped past in the blink of an eye. In the hills, Bheem's soldiers faced a shortage of food. In the villages, the people were terrorised by the Nizam's ruthless military action. No help was forthcoming from them for Bheem's army. Bheem's secret forces went to the surrounding villages. They sang songs, explained the strength of resistance and brought grains. Komuram Bheem's message spread further throughout the neighbourhood.

In a conclave of chieftains, it was resolved to send a letter to the Nizam, as a second attempt to discuss the matter frankly. Bheem had it written by

Mahadu. The summary of it was: "If the gond kingdom is granted to 12 villages, we will remain obedient to the Nizam." That letter reached the tahsildar, Abdul Sattar, but no reply came from the Nizam. The Nizam's men were busy destroying the crops in the surrounding villages, harassing women and burning down the huts of people.

In Jodeghat, Bheem explained the strategy to be followed in the war. He said that in resisting their enemy, all elements available in nature and conceivable in thought, weapons such as stones, pebbles, ropes, sticks and trenches, were useful. He demonstrated the method of attacking suddenly and then hiding behind shrubs and trees. He showed how to isolate the enemy and then to destroy them. That morning, Raghu brought a man and stood him before Komuram Bheem.

He said, "I come from the Sub-Collector's office. He wants to speak to you. If you permit it, he will come and speak to you."

"OK! Bring him to the bungalow," said Bheem easily.

Raghu walked with the messenger until he decided they had covered enough distance and warned him, "The Sub-Collector should come alone. Nobody should come with him. He should be unarmed."

Accepting the request, the Sub-Collector came alone and was seated on a cot in the bungalow. The following conversation took place between Bheem and him:

"Komuram Bheem, any amount of land that you ask for will be given to you and to your uncles. Permits, too, will be sanctioned. Please stop this fight."

"This fight is not for us alone. We are doing this for the gonds, kolams and the people of many other tribes."

"Then the land permits for the twelve gudems that you asked for will be given. The land will become yours. Stop this fight."

"It is not the land permits alone that we want," said Bheem. "We also want to have our own authority over those twelve villages. We will establish a gond kingdom."

"What? How can this be possible?!" spat the Sub-Collector incredulously.

"Why not? First of all, how did this forest become government land? We do not want the drama of land permits in our twelve gudems. We are not asking for charity. We demand this as our right. To tell you the truth, not only the twelve villages, but we also want the right to rule our gond lands from Utnoor to Rajora. Please go and tell this to your government. You may send more armies to try and kill us. But as long as a single gond child is alive, he will surely fight for the gond kingdom. Our fight will go on forever until we retake our kingdom."

Hearing Bheem's words, the Sub-Collector's face paled. He was amazed at the audacity of the gond youth, who considered the Nizam's government to be of no more importance than a strand of straw. He sat for some time with his face lowered, expression hidden, still filled with incredulity. Afterwards, he retraced his steps to his camp.

Seven months had passed since Komuram Bheem had become engaged in war. There was a severe scarcity of food, as no food came from the plains. Hunger marked everybody's faces. Yet Bheem sought to continue the battle for their freedom and wished to keep the dream alive.

Then came the alarming news, "The Nizam's government plans a big attack, and his army is on the move."

As soon as Bheem gave the command, the sound of war drums filled the air. People poured in from all sides, ready to go to war. There was a dauntless fighting spirit marking their faces. There was enthusiasm, and a strong desire for victory. They were poor, but they were the embodiment of boldness.

Bheem looked around at them and spoke:

"Uncles! Relatives and brothers! We are now in the midst of a war and we will not give up! We will certainly win this battle. But what if we lose the war? None of us may survive. If we do survive, we must know why we were defeated. We must establish the one truth. What is this truth? That, under the rule of this government, there are uncountable people suffering just like us. We have not brought them all into our fold yet. The history of the struggles of the past also tells us this. However, we will not step back now. We will fight for this land, for this earth and for our kingdom. Our fight will not go in vain. Whatever may happen to us, generations to come will learn from our battles. They will fight with greater strength than us. My dear gond brothers, blow the trumpets, and beat the drums. Don't forget that you must not allow even a single soldier to

climb up the hills and set foot on the plateau. Fight on ferociously. Victory to our torch flag!"

Addressing his people thus, with an undaunted spirit, he embraced all his friends.

The beating of the drums continued.

Throughout the night, several methods of warfare were discussed. They spoke about the precautions to be taken, and the measures to counteract the enemy's strategies. The representatives of the twelve villages and the youths understood the methods to be employed in harassing the enemy till they surrendered.

The sun was yet to rise in the east. Even after relentless conflict over ten long days, the enemy was unable to make their way up to Jodeghat. The squads of Bheem's army stood like fortresses in each of the paths leading to the plateau, standing steadfast against the enemy. For the Nizam's army, victory was nowhere in sight, and they saw no chance of defeating Bheem's army. They were locked in a stalemate.

It was in this situation that Kurdu Patel, the chief of Jodeghat village, betrayed his people and joined hands with the government. In great secrecy, he showed the soldiers a path leading up to the plateau. The Nizam's army grabbed the opportunity with both hands and stealthily climbed onto the plateau. Even before their presence could register on Bheem and his army, they fired at the eleven heroes. Under the cover of darkness, they killed many of the warriors and began to burn down the huts.

In the midst of the chaos, the voice of Kurdu Patel, who was right behind Komuram Bheem, could be heard loudly proclaiming, "Sir, that is Komuram Bheem," pointing him out from the crowd.

In this way, the traitor revealed the secrets of his home. All at once, there was a shower of bullets upon Bheem.

Bheem fell. The day was 1 September 1940.

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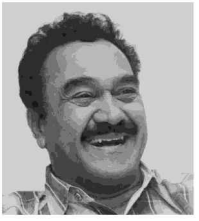
Though betrayed by Kurdu Patel, Komuram Bheem's vision for his community has persisted to the present day, as though in defiance of this betrayal. Even today he is worshipped as a deity in the form of Bheemal Pen. His death anniversary is celebrated yearly on Aswayuja Pournami at Jodeghat, where a large event is held and attended not only by the tribal community but also by journalists and scholars.

A statue of Komuram Bheem was unveiled on Tankbund road in Hyderabad in 2012, further cementing his role as an integral part of the history of the state, and in the struggle for freedom for his community and the forest.

In 2014, after the creation of Telangana state, the government allocated 25 crore rupees for the construction of the Komuram Bheem memorial, in the form of a tribal museum at Jodeghat and another at the Jodeghat hill rock. In 2016, the year that the museum and memorial were inaugurated, Adilabad district was reorganised and a section was separated and renamed as the Komuram Bheem Asifabad district, again in memory of the brave gond leader and martyr.

The valour of the gond hero, Komuram Bheem, will remain etched in the annals of history. He sacrificed his life for the liberation of his motherland and for the freedom of his people.



Bhoopal (1953-) is one of the founders of the Jana Natya Mandali, a famous cultural troupe in the two Telugu states. A noted actor and writer, Bhoopal acted in the Telugu films, Maa Bhoomi, Daasi and Komuram Bheem and the Hindi film Paar.

Translator P. A. Kumar worked in the Central Government and resides at Mysore.

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